

“Enough for Everyone”

Mark 6:30-44

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If you have been attending worship at South Church for awhile, you know the Feeding of the Five Thousand is right up there near the top of my list of favorite stories. Though Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each tell it a little differently, each give it different emphasis; there are profound truths in the story upon which they would all agree. After many years of preaching, I still find this text to be a witness to what we really need to know as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In this text, Jesus is a healer of wounds, a teacher of wisdom, and a miracle worker who multiplies groceries! He is also a mentor of twelve disciples! Like so many excellent mentors, Jesus seizes on an unplanned opportunity by opening up a simple truth which will make all the difference to the church throughout the ages.

Here it is in a nutshell. The disciples look at the size of the crowd and the amount of food in their backpack, and they quickly conclude there won't be enough for everyone. They do the math and there's no way there's enough to go around. This is what we might call pre-resurrection thinking. Jesus looks at the same crowd and at the same quantity of bread and fish, and is undeterred by the apparent shortage. He has learned the new math! He plows ahead believing that with God's blessing, there will be enough, the hunger of the world can be satisfied. This is what we might call post-resurrection thinking. To this day, there are still churches trapped by and choking on pre-resurrection thinking. I call it scarcity thinking. Fortunately, to this day, there are churches alive and thriving and growing on post-resurrection thinking.

It's the Resurrection that changed everything. Prior to that first Easter morning, the thinking of the disciples was like a beginning piano student. They could see the notes, but they couldn't hear the music. They could count the beats in a measure, but they couldn't imagine the explosion of sound or the delight of melody or the intrigue of dissonance. They could learn the vocabulary of 'piano' and 'forte' but they couldn't catch the off beat thrill of syncopation! They were limited, through no fault of their own, by their culture's tendency to think inside the box.

But after that first Easter morning, windows open! Bells ring! Whistles blow! Permission is given to think unorthodox thoughts, and to color outside the lines! The realm of impossibility gives way to the realm of possibility. If God can raise Jesus from the dead, surely God can empower the church to feed 5000 hungry people.

If God can raise Jesus from the dead, surely God can empower 48 South Church youth and advisors to build a home with a deserving family in Baltimore, Maryland.

If God can raise Jesus from the dead, God can surely empower churches to send students to seminary with adequate tuition scholarships so they don't graduate three years later with a mountain of debt.

If God can raise Jesus from the dead, God can equip a church for a ministry with people seeking sobriety. You catch the drift of this!

The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead changes forever how disciples understand love's impact on the world.

So, on that late afternoon, on that hillside, in that remote place apart, in the presence of that crowd of 5000, Jesus was at his mentoring best!

Over the years, people have often asked me, “What did they teach you in seminary? The virgin birth? The Second Coming? Original sin? Miracles? What did they teach you?” My typical answer is this: they taught me to think in a new way; they taught me to think theologically; they taught me to reflect on life from God’s point of view. This is essentially what we see happening in the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Jesus is teaching the disciples a new way of thinking.

Some of them were fishermen and they had a certain way of thinking about the world that involved nets and bait and throwing back the ones that were too little.

Some of them were tax collectors and they thought about things from an economics point of view. Some were carpenters and they thought about things in terms of measuring twice and cutting once.

In this scene, Jesus, the mentor, presents a whole new way of thinking. He invites them to understand the world from God’s point of view; namely, that there is always enough! Whenever this happens, whenever a church begins to think about mission from God’s point of view, I say, ‘watch out!’ Fasten your seat belt! Anything can happen! Five thousand people can be satisfied on just a few loaves of rye bread and a couple of mackerel!

For me, this change in thinking reminds me of my battle with poetry. As a young, uninitiated man, I approached a poem with my mind. I kept asking the question, ‘what does this poem mean?’ I didn’t know any better. I didn’t have a mentor to open for me the real treasure a poem contains. All I know is that at some point along the way, I encountered Robert Bly. This wise old poet invited me to approach a poem with my heart. I stopped asking ‘what does this poem mean.’ Instead, I began to ask, ‘how is this poem food for my soul.’ And from that time, I have never been hungry!

Stewardship in the church is the same way. As a young pilgrim, I thought of my gift to the church as an amount that reflected what I was getting out of it. I call that the consumer mentality. ‘Let’s see...I get a live sermon on Sunday morning. I get youth group on Sunday night. I get a potluck supper once a month. I get special music once in awhile. I get a pat on the back from my minister.’ I added all that stuff up and I put a value on it! My pledge represented what I was ‘getting’ from my church. I didn’t have a mentor! I didn’t have someone to teach me about stewardship from God’s point of view!

Many mentors have come along to teach me about stewardship from God’s point of view. One day about five years ago, I was asked by one of our members if I would ever go and visit her friend who had had a stroke and was confined to a wheel chair in her East Hartford home. This church member explained that her friend had no church home and wanted to be connected to a church nearby. So, I phoned ahead and made a date to call on this woman who is paralyzed on one side. I rang the back door bell and I was given a warm greeting. We talked for about a half hour. Then she said, “I want to belong to a church so I’ll have a place to send my thank offerings.” I leaned in a little closer, and I said, ‘thank offerings?’ And she told me she was just thankful to be alive and she wanted to thank God every week with an offering. She didn’t know if she’d ever be able to actually come to church or to hear the choir or to listen to a sermon. But she had this need to thank God on a regular basis for her life! Then she asked me if that would be all right. I told Carol I thought it would just fine. And then I thanked her for teaching me about stewardship from God’s point of view!

I just want to invite all of us this morning to imagine ourselves on that hillside, in that late afternoon crowd, in that group of disciples, in the presence of that marvelous Mentor. Can you get yourself there? Okay, we are all there. We see the crowd of 5000. We hear Jesus inviting us to feed the crowd. We see the five loaves and the two fish. We look around at each other. Do we choke on the pre-resurrection thinking? Or do we take the road less traveled? Do we rise to the call of post-resurrection thinking? Do we conclude there is not enough to go around, or do we start sharing the food, confident that with God's blessing there is enough for everyone? This is how the text was speaking to me this time around. And I share it with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen!