

The Surprise Dinner Party

Mark 6:30-44

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Through the years I've gotten the opportunity to participate in and lead many different mission trips. These times are great because you get to serve alongside other believers and you share many fun and unique experiences. We always come home with lots of stories. I always find it interesting to hear which stories get relayed to parents. Usually, if there's a story that every parent heard, it's something that I can assume made a pretty significant impact on the kids. Sometimes the story everyone tells is about our transportation problems, others it's about something goofy that I did, and still other times it's about a fun experience we shared. But sometimes kids all tell about a time when we learned something together or got to see God move. Those are my favorite stories of all.

The gospels each record the story of Jesus' life. Reading each of them helps to give us insight into who Jesus is and the things He did. Different writers choose to include and emphasize different things. In our passage this morning, we get to look at the only miracle (other than the resurrection) that all four gospel writers recorded. This leads us to believe that while they all saw Jesus do some incredible miracles, something about this one stood out to them. This morning we're going to walk through Mark's account of the feeding of the 5,000 and hopefully draw some very practical lessons from it that we can carry into our own lives.

The Return of the Apostles

Mark starts by telling us about the disciples returning home from the mission Jesus had sent them on.

³⁰ The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and taught. ³¹ Then Jesus said, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn't even have time to eat. (Mark 6:30-31, NLT)

If you recall, right before Mark told us about the death of John the Baptist, he had told us about the disciples being sent out in pairs to go and preach, heal the sick, and drive out demons. Now, he tells us they had returned. When the twelve returned home, they told Jesus about all that had happened on their trips. I can only imagine the stories they would have had to tell. I suspect these men were exhausted from their work and their travels, but they were also energized by the way they had seen God move, and even moreso, by the fact that He had moved through them! I imagine them sitting around a table together telling all about the ways they had seen God's faithfulness and the work God was doing all over the nation of Israel. I suspect Jesus was proud of the work they had done and was excited to see their excitement.

But Jesus also realized an important truth—they were all exhausted. They were energized by the ministry, but there were more people to care for than there were hours in the day. They often reached the end of the day realizing they hadn't even eaten. Jesus knew that while you can live this way for a little while, no one can keep that kind of pace up indefinitely. So He planned for them to go find a quiet, secluded place where they could rest and recharge so they would be able to do the work of ministry more effectively. Mark tells us they hopped in a boat and headed across the Sea of Galilee to a secluded spot...but things didn't go quite as planned.

The Crowd

Listen to what happened after they set sail,

³² So they left by boat for a quiet place, where they could be alone. ³³ But many people recognized them and saw them leaving, and people from many towns ran ahead along the shore and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. (Mark 6:32-34, NLT)

It appears that even though the disciples were trying to get away from the crowds and head to a quiet place for some alone time, people saw them leaving and managed to beat them to their destination. Their destination would have been about 4 miles away by water and 8 miles away on foot. We don't know how exactly the people got there ahead of them. It's possible the winds weren't favorable for sailing, or maybe they took their time sailing across, or maybe even did some fishing along the way. Whatever the case is, when they landed on the shore on the opposite side of the Sea, there was already a large crowd gathered. Mark says that when Jesus saw the crowd, He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

The word for Jesus having compassion literally refers to a feeling in your bowels. Jesus felt for these people in His gut. He felt their need and their hunger. Mark says the people were like sheep without a shepherd. And Jesus described Himself as the Good Shepherd. A good shepherd does whatever it takes to protect His flock. And so, despite Jesus' exhaustion, He took pity on the people and began to teach. He gave of Himself because He loved them, He felt their pain, and He knew He could meet their need.

This is a wonderful reminder to us that God sees us and cares about us. He cares how we feel. He cares about the things that affect us. He cares about our struggles, our trials, and our frustrations. He feels the things we feel. And Jesus demonstrates what that kind of care looks like—He gives of Himself to provide what the people needed. He continues to do the same for you and me today.

After Jesus had been teaching for a while, the disciples started to anticipate a problem. They were out in the middle of nowhere and this large crowd was soon going to get hungry. That's when we see the most fascinating part of this account.

Jesus' Solution

Here's what Mark says happened,

³⁵ Late in the afternoon his disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. ³⁶ Send the crowds away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy something to eat." ³⁷ But Jesus said, "You feed them." "With what?" they asked. "We'd have to work for months to earn enough money to buy food for all these people!" ³⁸ "How much bread do you have?" he asked. "Go and find out." They came back and reported, "We have five loaves of bread and two fish." (Mark 6:35-38, NLT)

When the disciples told Jesus about this problem looming on the horizon, they asked Him to stop teaching and send the people away so they could head to the nearest towns and get some food for themselves. You have to wonder if the disciples were starting to feel the pangs of hunger themselves and were looking forward to a brief respite from the pace of ministry. Jesus, however, did not send the crowds away. Instead, He told the disciples to feed them.

I wonder what Jesus hoped their response would be. Was Jesus encouraging them to show the same kind of faith in God's provision they had shown during their missionary journey? Was He inviting them to head to the nearest town and bring back some takeout for everyone? I'm not sure exactly what He hoped they would do. What they did do, however, was not what Jesus desired.

They came to Jesus to tell Him the impossibility of the task He had just laid before them. They pointed to the fact that they didn't have any food and to buy enough food for everyone would cost more than half a year's salary! This probably wasn't an exaggeration. To feed a crowd of this size would have cost a fortune.

Jesus, however, was undeterred. Instead He asked the disciples to find out what they had at their disposal. Jesus wasn't interested in hearing what they couldn't do or didn't have. He was interested in knowing the resources they did have. They came back and said they had 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. John's gospel says this food belonged to a young boy. These would not have been big loaves of bread like we think of. Barley loaves would have been relatively small and coarse—more like a large cracker than anything else. And the 2 fish were not likely large mouth bass...they were probably more like sardines. The food they had was not much to go on at all—it basically a Lunchable! But what Jesus knew, and the disciples had forgotten was that what seems insignificant in our hands is more than enough in the hands of God.

The Miracle

Jesus asked the disciples to bring what they had to Him, and then He performed a miracle to enable them to feed the crowd. Here's how Mark describes it.

³⁹ Then Jesus told the disciples to have the people sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of fifty or a hundred. ⁴¹ Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread to the disciples so they

could distribute it to the people. He also divided the fish for everyone to share.⁴² They all ate as much as they wanted,⁴³ and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish.⁴⁴ A total of 5,000 men and their families were fed. (Mark 6:39-44, NLT)

Jesus had the disciples split the people into groups of 50 or 100 and ask them to sit down. Then Jesus seemingly prayed over the food—likely reciting a typical Jewish prayer, which recognized God as the provider and thanked Him for His provision, then started breaking the loaves into pieces. He did the same with the fish. I find myself wondering how this worked exactly. Did Jesus just keep breaking the bread and giving them more? Did He split it up and give the disciples a container with a piece and asked them to keep breaking off pieces for everyone? We don't know. What we do know is that miraculously, there was more than enough food for everyone—a group that the gospels describe as 5,000 men, which means the crowd may have actually been 10,000-15,000 people including women and children!

Not only did everyone get something to eat, Mark says they all ate as much as they wanted, and there were still leftovers! The disciples picked up 12 baskets full of leftovers. So, after feeding this huge group of people, the amount of food they had left over was greater than the amount of food they started with! There is simply no explanation for this except a miracle that God alone could perform.

Some people believe that Mark's intent in this story was for us to see a contrast between Jesus and Moses in this miracle. Like Jesus, Moses had faced a huge crowd of hungry people after they had left Egypt. Moses asked God how he was supposed to feed such a large group of people in such a remote place. That's when God provided manna for the people to eat. Each day, they had to collect manna, but only enough for that day. Mark makes it clear that Jesus was far greater than Moses. Jesus didn't panic when faced with the multitude. Jesus provided for the people Himself. And He didn't provide just enough for them to eat today—He provided so much that they all had leftovers! It's possible that Mark words his gospel the way he does because he was reminding his readers of a simple truth—Jesus is far greater than anyone who had come before—even greater than Moses!

Applications

While this is a fascinating account of a truly astounding miracle, if the only thing we take away from it is knowledge of a story from Jesus' ministry, then we've missed the point. All four gospel writers record this miracle because they believed it not only taught us something about Jesus, but also because there were lessons for us to learn. I can think of a few lessons we can learn from this passage.

First, we should bring the resources we have to God rather than sitting on the sidelines because of the resources we lack. Jesus told the disciples to meet a need, but all they could see was what they lacked. They didn't have the eyes of faith that reminded them that what was insignificant in their hands was more than enough in the

hands of Jesus. He was asking them to bring what they had to Him, and then He would do the rest.

The same is true for us. Sometimes God calls us to tasks that we cannot possibly accomplish in our own strength. Our temptation is to see all the ways we cannot possibly do what God has commanded. But we need to learn the same lesson the disciples did. God simply asks us to bring what we have to Him and trust Him to use that to meet the need. In our hands, our resources may be insufficient—which is why we should place our resources in God's hands. This can take lots of forms:

- God may ask you to give financially to something, even though you may not feel like your gift may do much. On its own, it may be meager, but when we give to God, we know He can use our meager offerings to do more than we imagine.
- God may ask you to contribute your time or your talents to serve Him in some way. Rather than looking at all the skills you don't have, instead look at the skills you do have and offer them to the Lord. Nothing is small or insignificant when it is done in faith.
- God may ask you to have a conversation with a specific person, or to go out of your way to help someone. What may seem like a small gesture to you may be used by God as a watershed moment in a person's life.

The point is this: we must learn to see what we have to offer through eyes of faith. Rather than focusing on all the things we lack, we must instead choose to see what we have to offer, believing that we serve a God who can take our seemingly insignificant offerings and use them in ways we would never have imagined.

Second, we see the importance of meeting people's needs. If I were in Jesus' sandals, I might have been tempted to ignore the people's hunger and just continue teaching, believing that if the people were really hungry for God's Word, they would overlook their hunger for food. But Jesus had a wisdom we sometimes lack. Jesus understood that sometimes we need to meet people's physical needs before they can possibly think about their spiritual needs.

Often, people cannot hear the good news of the gospel over the roar of their growling stomach. Whether a person needs food, lodging, help getting back on their feet, acceptance, love, or any number of other things, Christians need to recognize that it's not enough for us to only focus on people's spiritual needs—their physical needs matter as well. Jesus shows us this in His compassion for the people gathered that day.

We can take this too far in the opposite direction though too. Some churches have become so focused on social action that they have forgotten about pointing people to their need for a savior. We must find the balance, recognizing that loving people requires us to care for all their needs—both the physical and the spiritual.

Third, we see that we should alleviate suffering when we can. If I'm honest, I resonate with the disciples here. I might have been tempted to chastise the people for their foolishness. It was not the disciples' fault that nobody thought to pack a sack lunch

to take along. The disciples' solution was simple—their problem is not our problem. Send them away so they can figure it out on their own. Jesus took a different approach. He instead told them to meet the needs of the people they saw in front of them.

Let's be honest. Much of the time we don't want to be burdened with other people's problems. We have our own issues to worry about. And sometimes we conclude that since people got themselves into this situation, it's up to them to get themselves out. And there are times where I think that kind of tough love is needed. But often we hide behind this "tough love" concept because we just don't want to be bothered to help others. It's easier to just leave them to deal with things on their own. Jesus took compassion on these people. He told the disciples to meet the need instead of pawning responsibility for doing so onto someone else. I believe this is the attitude He wants us to have as we deal with the world. In those times where we might be tempted to write someone off, concluding they don't deserve our help, we must remember and be grateful that that's not how God treats us...and then follow His example.

Fourth, opportunities for ministry often present themselves as interruptions.

Jesus and the disciples were tired. I can picture the disciples in the boat as they neared the shore and saw the crowd gathered. I imagine a collective groan, because they were just looking for some alone time. But if they had ignored the people in favor of taking the time for themselves, they would have missed the miracle that impacted them all so deeply. Much of the time, opportunities for ministry come at inopportune times. We must be willing to set aside our own agendas when we see an opportunity God is putting before us. It can take many forms.

- A person who needs your help when you've got a to-do list of your own to work through.
- A chance to minister to others when you are in a hospital or doctor's office dealing with your own health issues.
- A person who wants to talk when you've had a long day and would rather just sit in silence.
- A request for help when you've got plans to do something you enjoy.

God provides openings for ministry. Often, they aren't what or when we would expect, and they will often require us to look beyond ourselves to see the needs of the people standing right in front of us.

I think one of the takeaways from the feeding of the 5,000 is that we need to learn to see people like Jesus did. Jesus saw people lost and in need and He had compassion on them. He wanted to teach the disciples to see with eyes of faith, believing God could use them to do greater things than they could do on their own. He also wanted them to see beyond themselves and their needs to the needs of others. He wanted them to seize opportunities to help those before them rather than looking for excuses to avoid it. I suspect all four gospels record this miracle because it taught them lessons they never forgot. We would be wise to learn from it as well.

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