

## **Don't Count Your Blessings – Multiply Them! (John 6:1-13)**

**Rev. A.J. Thomas**

*Jesus went across the Galilee Sea (that is, the Tiberias Sea).<sup>2</sup> A large crowd followed him, because they had seen the miraculous signs he had done among the sick.<sup>3</sup> Jesus went up a mountain and sat there with his disciples.*

*<sup>4</sup> It was nearly time for Passover, the Jewish festival.*

*<sup>5</sup> Jesus looked up and saw the large crowd coming toward him. He asked Philip, "Where will we buy food to feed these people?"<sup>6</sup> Jesus said this to test him, for he already knew what he was going to do.*

*<sup>7</sup> Philip replied, "More than a half year's salary worth of food wouldn't be enough for each person to have even a little bit."*

*<sup>8</sup> One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said,<sup>9</sup> "A youth here has five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that for a crowd like this?"*

*<sup>10</sup> Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass there. They sat down, about five thousand of them.<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus took the bread. When he had given thanks, he distributed it to those who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, each getting as much as they wanted.<sup>12</sup> When they had plenty to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather up the leftover pieces, so that nothing will be wasted."<sup>13</sup> So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves that had been left over by those who had eaten.*

The family and their guests were just sitting down to a beautiful dinner for 12, when the hostess turned to her 5-year-old daughter and asked if she would like to say grace. The child looked up and said, "I'm not sure what to say." Her mother reassured her, saying, "Just say what you hear mommy say." Around the table, heads were bowed and eyes closed as a little voice rang out, "Dear God, why did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Feeding a crowd – it's what Jesus did in the Scripture we read. The feeding of the 5000 along the shores of the Sea of Galilee is one of the most well-known and celebrated stories of our faith. Jesus has been traveling throughout the region around the Sea for some time now – teaching, preaching, healing, performing signs and wonders. Word about him is spreading, and everywhere he goes, a large crowd followed.

Jesus had been preaching all morning, but around 11:58, someone looked at their watch and thought, "I don't think we're going to beat the disciples of John the Baptist to the Golden Corral." 12:15 rolled around, and then 12:30, 1:00, 1:30, 2:00 and Jesus was still going. Jesus was the best preacher they'd ever heard, but they were also hungry.

At 2:08, Jesus finally finished up – I promise, I won't do that to you – and said to his disciples, "It's such a beautiful day, and I hate to send everyone home, so how about a picnic? Nothing beats a picnic on the mountainside overlooking the Sea of Galilee."

One problem, though: have you ever planned a picnic lunch for 5000? It takes me half a day to get ready for dinner for 8. Preparing to feed 5000? I can't even get my head around the preparations to feed such a crowd, let alone how to do it on the spot, let alone how to pay for even a simple meal for so many.

The disciples couldn't figure that out, either. Phillip was the first one to speak up. To get a picnic for the 5000 would take six months of paychecks. A picnic beside the sea was WAY out of the budget. "Interesting idea you've got, Jesus, but we just don't have that kind of money around here!"

The disciples of Jesus are invited to be part of one of his greatest and most famous miracles, and they respond by listing all the reasons it can't happen. 2000 years later, and there are still times when Jesus presents us with an opportunity, and we immediately turn it into a problem. Let's read on. Verse 8:

*<sup>8</sup> One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, <sup>9</sup> "A youth here has five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that for a crowd like this?"*

Andrew was likely a Methodist – his first instincts were to have a fundraiser or a potluck. I can see him working through the crowd. "Hey everyone, Jesus needs your help. We're going to have a picnic, but we don't have any food. Does anyone have anything to contribute?"

Among all those 5000, Andrew comes back with . . . a child . . . a peasant child whose mother had the foresight to pack along a meager lunch of five barley loaves and two pickled herring. It's the equivalent a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a little bag of chips and a pack of Little Debbie's. Andrew holds up the single sack lunch, and says, "I found this little boy's lunch, but among so many people, what good is it?"

It's just bread and fish. No cheese or grapes. No dates or figs. No pomegranates, no olives, no wine. No tables, no chairs, no plates, no napkins, no knives and forks. "We just don't have everything we need."

Again, here's an opportunity, but it's viewed as a problem. Too little to go around. Limited resources. "We just don't have, We just don't have, We just don't have."

While it is perhaps human nature to focus on what we don't have, as people of faith, we are invited to focus our attention differently. Discipleship, being a follower of Jesus, is a lifetime of growth so that we come to the place where we see things as Jesus sees them. We move from our scarcity mindset to his abundance mindset. We stop fretting over what we lack, and to develop appreciation for what we **DO** have, and to have the faith that whatever it is, when placed in the hands of Jesus, he can and will do something extraordinary with it. Verses 10-13:

*<sup>10</sup> Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass there. They sat down, about five thousand of them. <sup>11</sup> Then Jesus took the bread. When he had given thanks, he distributed it to those who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, each getting as much as they wanted. <sup>12</sup> When they had plenty to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather up the leftover pieces, so that nothing will be wasted." <sup>13</sup> So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves that had been left over by those who had eaten.*

Didn't look like much – five loaves and two fish. What is that among so many people? In our hands, not much. But in the hands of Jesus, it's enough. More than enough, in fact. Plenty to go around and then 12 baskets of leftovers.

The first move for people of faith is to stop counting what we don't have, so we can start counting what we **do**. The second move is to go beyond just getting a count of our blessings – even if they seem as meager as five loaves and two fish – and place them into the hands of Jesus, where they are multiplied in order to bless others.

Our gifts and resources can seem awfully small and limited. That's because in our hands, they are. But placed in the hands of Jesus, they are multiplied far beyond what you or I could do with them.

Just look at what he did with five loaves and two fish. What could he do with everything we have? When we give, the best of our time, our talent, our treasure, when we give that to Jesus as freely as a little boy beside the sea did, the blessings just start to flow.

In Israel, there are two main bodies of water. One is the Sea of Galilee, where today's story took place, and the other is the Dead Sea, about 85 miles to the south. If you ever go to the Holy Land, you'll likely visit both of these bodies of water. The Dead Sea is so-named because nothing lives in it. It is salty - about 33% salt, 8 times saltier than ocean water - because while water flows into the Dead Sea, it is at the lowest point on earth, some 1400 feet below sea level, there is nowhere for the water to flow back out.

By contrast, the Sea of Galilee both takes in and gives out. Whereas nothing lives in the Dead Sea, the Sea of Galilee is teeming with fish and all kinds of marine life. It is both the pouring in **and** the pouring out that gives the Sea of Galilee its life. The Dead Sea only takes in and is therefore dead, the Sea of Galilee receives **and** gives, and that flow brings it to life.

The same is true for us. As people of faith, our lives find their fullest and truest meaning when we give as well as receive. Jesus invites us to move beyond being consumers to contributors, and as we give and share as freely as we have received, we are blessed beyond measure.

When we sing the Doxology in worship, we sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." The blessings flow when we receive them with gratitude, and then share them with joy. When we try to hold onto and hoard God's good gifts, the blessings dry up, and our lives become as dead as a sea in which water only flows in, but never out. .

Being a follower of Jesus means being one who gives. God is a giver, and we are created in God's image. We seek to be Christlike, and Christ willingly gave himself for us. So, too, we are called to be generous as God as generous. As we grow in our capacity to give, we grow as better reflections of the image of God.

Giving is as essential to being a Christian as breathing is to living. Breathing requires both a taking in and a giving out. Breath comes in, breath goes out. Breath comes in, breath goes out. There's a rhythm to it, isn't there? A balance, an exchange.

Maybe you've heard the story of the man who was afraid he would run out breath, and so in an attempt to hold onto as much breath as he could, he would only breathe in, but never breathe out. And so he'd take a deep breath in, and then another, and then another, until he couldn't breathe in any more. Do you know what eventually happened? He passed out is what happened, and when he woke up, his body was naturally, on its own, breathing in **and** breathing out, and he felt so much better than when he was only trying to breathe in.

Or, think of it this way. What does a sponge do? It soaks up. Eventually, a sponge soaks up as much as it can, and once it does, can it soak up any more? No, **unless** the sponge is wrung out a bit. In fact, **only** if it is wrung out, can it soak up any more. And the more times it is wrung out, the more it can soak up.

It's a cycle – the more we share, the more joy and fulfilment we receive. Friends, let's be the kind of people in whom and through whom God's blessings constantly flow. Generosity begets generosity, grace leads to grace, blessing leads to more blessing.

You ever wonder what it felt like to be the little boy who gave his lunch to Jesus, who then multiplied it and fed 5000 people with it? I'll bet it felt pretty good. Jesus was using the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary that day. Jesus, then as now, was in the business of transforming lives, and of all the lives that were transformed that day, the one who shared his gifts with Jesus and helped make the miracle happen received the greatest blessing.

To me, one of the most remarkable things about this story is not just that Jesus performs the miracle, but that he invites us to be part of making it happen. He doesn't have to do that, so why does he? Because he wants to bless us.

Don't just count your blessings – multiply them! Friends, we worship a God of abundance, who shows us that when we give freely, there is always plenty to go around, and then some. Let's be part of the next miracle.