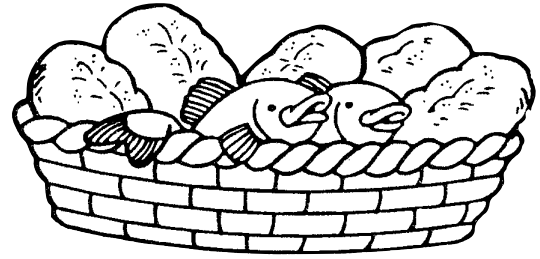


Jesus Feeds the 5,000

Background Information

A lesson set written by Carol Hulbert, 2002, First United Methodist Church, 120 S. State Street Ann Arbor, MI 48104

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Story Background: Story Setting

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus (except Jesus' resurrection) that is recorded in all four Gospels. As with stories that are covered in multiple sources there are slight differences between the various Gospels. However all four agree on important points: the number of loaves and fishes (five and two, respectfully), the number of people present (5,000 men), and the number of leftover baskets (12).

In our story Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee to retreat to be by themselves. The story in John's Gospel doesn't mention it, but the other Gospels tell us that Jesus had just learned about the death of John the Baptist and had wanted to withdraw to a solitary place. But seclusion was not to be had; the large crowds that had seen Jesus perform healing miracles followed him. They walked around the lake and were waiting when Jesus and the disciples arrived by boat. (John 6:2, Mark 6:33) We learn from Mark's Gospel that when Jesus saw the large crowd, "he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." (Mark 6:34) John doesn't report it but the other Gospels say that Jesus continued healing the sick. He certainly could have sought his quiet shelter but instead he welcomed the crowds. (Luke 9:11)

The crowds are hungry, a test

When it gets to be dinnertime, some of the disciples felt disappointed that Jesus didn't send the crowd away; people were probably becoming restless and hungry. (Matthew 14:15, Mark 6:36) In John's Gospel Jesus appears to test Philip by asking him about where to buy bread for the people to eat. Jesus must have known another miracle was going to occur.

(Jesus) said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. (John 6:5,6)

Philip was from this area so the question could be taken to mean: what local shops are best to buy from? However, it really is a test of faith and Philip fails. "He is asked *where* and can think only in terms of *how*." (Whitacre). Perhaps Jesus would have hoped that Philip would recall how Jesus had changed jars of water into wine and might have responded with something like "Lord, you can provide." But instead Philip answers with:

"Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" (John 6:7)

Background on miracles

A miracle can be described as a moment when, as a result of an unexpected and surprising event, one becomes aware of the presence and power of God at work. More simply, a miracle is a wonderful event that teaches us something about God. Jesus performed many miracles. He healed the sick, cured the lame, calmed a storm, and brought the dead back to life (to name a few). Jesus' miracles certainly must have amazed those who witnessed them.

Jesus did not want his miracles to be seen as some sort of "magic." He didn't want people to follow him around, just to see him perform miracles. Maybe this is why he often told those cured to, "see that no one knows about this." (Matthew 9:30). Jesus used his miracles to teach about God – that God was powerful, caring and had sent Jesus his son to earth. Look at the message that John wrote at the end of his Gospel at John 20:30,31.

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

A meager lunch becomes enough for leftovers!

To stage his miracle Jesus had the people sit down.

...the men sat down, about five thousand of them. (John 6:10c)

Mark 6:39 records that the people sat down in groups. Luke 9:14 reports that they sat in groups of about 50 each. Recall that when the Bible was written only men were counted. The total number of people present would have been much larger because surely there were also women and children there.

Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. (John 6:11)

It is important to note how little this lunch was. "Barley loaves were not the bakery-size loaves of our own times, but small flat cakes associated with the diet and eating habits of the poor. The small fishes were used as a relish with the bread." (Coffman)

When everyone had had enough to eat Jesus instructed the disciples to collect the leftovers. They gather 12 baskets of uneaten food – *after* everyone has eaten enough!

What this miracle holds for us

What does this miracle teach us about God? Beyond the obvious – which is that God is powerful – are at least three underlying lessons:

- Jesus wanted to teach a lesson about sharing. Sharing is significant even when we think that what little we have isn't worth sharing. Doesn't it make you wonder: what if the boy had withheld his lunch? Would Jesus not have been able to feed the multitudes? If we offer nothing to God, maybe he'll have nothing to use?
- God can take what little we have to offer and turn it into something great (i.e., leftovers). A boy offers his lunch of five loaves of bread and two fish, and of course, the disciples think it can't possibly help.

Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many? (John 6:8,9)

Haven't you heard yourself ask the same question? Have you said: "How can it be possible Lord? How can I make a difference?"

Have you felt the utter lack of gifts and talents to carry out what God asks? "God is able to multiply our talents, our time, our finances, our love, or anything else we offer to him to be used for his kingdom. As he does this, we gain faith in who God is, in his loving care, and in his provision of our salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ." (Smith)

- (The third underlying lesson in the details of this miracle is appropriate to teach our children.) It was a *young* boy offering his lunch that ends up feeding over 5000+ people. This shows that age is not a limitation to service for God. Jesus needs what *everyone* can bring.

What is the real miracle?

Scholars have debated about what is the greater miracle in this story. Is it that Jesus multiplied the bread and fish, or that the people really did bring along a little lunch and ended up sharing it? As Doug Norris tells it: "Perhaps the little guy inspired others to share. Wouldn't it be something if the miracle was a miracle of sharing, as people, one by one, pulled food out of their backpacks and shared with those around them.

Perhaps Jesus walked through the crowd, encouraging, touching, blessing, visiting, and the stingy, the selfish, and the hoarders gradually warmed up, and realized their potential by not only sharing their food, but by experiencing the joy of doing something significant with and for Jesus." What would our world look like if we all caught such a sharing attitude?

A miracle happens – then what?

An immediate result of this miracle is that the people realized what had happened.

Seeing this miracle that Jesus had performed, the people there said, “Surely this is the Prophet who was to come into the world! John 6:14 (TEV)

“When they had seen the sign that Jesus did: The way Jesus provided bread in the wilderness reminded those men of Moses in the wilderness, and his promise of a coming Prophet.” (Guzik)

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

Now it is our duty to take this miracle and have it provide teaching for our hearts and minds.

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Questions to ask:

- Doesn’t it make you wonder: what if the boy hadn’t come or had withheld his lunch? Would Jesus not have been able to feed the multitudes? If we offer nothing to God, maybe he’ll have nothing to use? (Jesus needs what we can bring.)
- This leads us to another question: What is the greater miracle in this story -- that Jesus multiplied the bread or that the people really *did* bring along a little lunch and ended up sharing it?
- Or is the miracle that on that day people, through his teaching and miracles, came to believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah?