

**Setting the Table**  
**Matthew 14:13-21**  
**Second Baptist Church, Memphis**  
**February 10, 2008**  
**Dr. Brent Beasley**

We who follow Jesus are often called to set a table where we might otherwise think one can't be set.

A large crowd had gathered to hear Jesus preach and teach and see him heal the blind, the sick, and the lame.

They stayed with him all day, and when evening came, the disciples approached Jesus and said, *We're out here in the middle of nowhere. There's no place to get any food at all. Send these people away so that they can go into the villages and get themselves some food.*

And Jesus said, *They don't need to go away into the villages. You give them something to eat.*

*Well we don't have anything here except 5 loaves and two fish.*

*Bring them to me.*

And he took the 5 loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to pass out to the crowd. And everyone ate and was filled.

Jesus said, *You give them something to eat.*

Jesus' words, *You give them something to eat* may sound harsh, insensitive to the stress that his followers are under. Such great crowds, such meager resources, the late hour, the lonely place.

The disciples are fairly sensible and logical people. They can think of a number of reasons why the multitude should get moving. Their thinking makes sense. It's late. They're hungry. They are in a remote area with no place to buy food.

But Jesus challenges them to dismiss the limitations of their logical reasoning and take seriously their holy imagination. *You're right*, Jesus agrees, *they are hungry. You give them something to eat!*

His suggestion scandalizes the disciples' logic. All they can possibly imagine is that if they had the money and a place to buy food, then perhaps they could begin to attend to these people's needs.

Jesus wants the disciples to let a sense of compassion over-ride their common sense. He wants them to go beyond the apparent limitations of the circumstances and proceed on faith.

They are with Jesus, after all. Therefore they should know in their hearts that anything is possible.

We, too, look at the vast needs of the world and despair. We look at a thing like the tornadoes of this past week. *Jesus, do something*, we plead. Send them somewhere. There must be somebody, some program, some organization somewhere that can take care of all of this. *Jesus, do something*.

Well, Jesus does something alright. He turns to us and asks us, *What do you have?* That's not exactly the response we were looking for.

We don't have much—just a couple of fish in our basket, and a few loaves. But he urges us to take what we have and recklessly share it, give it away, throw it away on the multitudes.

*[William Willimon]*

William Willimon, tells of asking an elementary school teacher how she kept teaching for over thirty years. Lots of folks burn out in a job like that.

She replied, *I have found that love is a renewable resource. The more you give it away, the more you receive. As someone said, in giving you receive.*

It's that Jesus taught paradox: the best way to take care of ourselves is to give love, even sacrificially at times. This applies to us not only as individuals but also as a church. Jesus' disciples were constantly astounded at how much Jesus

expected of them. We as a church should be astonished at how much Christ intends for us to do.

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. That suggests that the early church loved to tell this story. This is not the only miracle feeding story in the Bible. Someone once said that next to Homer's *Odyssey* the Bible is the "eatingest" book in the world.

In II Kings 4, a man brings a few loaves of bread and some grain to the prophet Elisha during a famine. Elisha orders the man to give the food offering to the hungry people. The man is dumbfounded. He only has one sack, but there are a hundred hungry people descending on him like vultures.

And like our Gospel story, there is the same beginning question: *How can we serve so many with so little?* And there is the same conclusion: All ate to their fill and still there was food left over.

It's the same old story that has happened over and over in the life of the community of faith: We may be astounded at how much Christ intends for us to do. I am sometimes astounded at what God seems to put before us to do. But God's grace can take what little we have and make it more than enough.

This miracle of Jesus feeding the multitude asks the church this question: Do we believe God will provide what we need to do

the ministry God wants done? Note the qualifiers—what we *need*, not want and the ministry *God* wants, not necessarily the ministry we have planned. Do we believe God will provide what we need to do the ministry God wants done?

Another way to ask the question: Do we operate according to a mindset of abundance or of scarcity? The mindset of scarcity or abundance is one of the most important controlling factors in how you approach life. The former engenders generosity and hope and openness; the latter fosters anxiety and competition and being closed.

*[Stephen Shoemaker, The Christian Century, July 5-12, 2000]*

A test is this: when you are approached by a new person, a new opportunity, a new request, is your first response “no”? Or “yes”? Do you operate according to a mindset that there are only 5 loaves and two fish? Or do you operate according to an assumption there are twelve basketfuls left over?

I read the biography of Henry Ward Beecher last year, the great preacher from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He once said, *Every tomorrow has two handles. We can take hold of it with the handle of anxiety or the handle of faith.*

I wonder what would happen if we operated with an abundance mentality instead of lamenting why things are the way they are, why we can't do this or do that, why we don't have enough to do what we feel called to do.

There are multitudes of hungry people in Memphis—and I don't mean simply physically hungry, although that's part of it. You know what I mean. There are multitudes of hungry people.

I don't know what would happen if we let our passionate compassion override our logic and calculations and overcome our anxiety and go beyond the apparent limitations and tap into a result that is only possible in our God- inspired imaginations.

The author Ray Bradbury says:

*If we listened to our intellect, we'd never have a love affair. We'd never have a friendship. We'd never go into business because we'd be cynical. Well, that's nonsense. You've got to jump off cliffs all the time and build your wings on the way down.*

*Jesus, send them away. We don't have enough.*

*You give them something to eat!*

*But...*I don't know what would happen if we just took everything we had and gave it to God and let God bless it.

I don't know what would happen, but it might just be a miracle.

I don't know.

I do know that it hit me hard when I read Jesus' words—*So you give them something to eat*—that the disciples had a firm grasp

of good sense and logic and mathematics but a poor grasp on the ways of God. And that describes me.

*You give them something to eat.*

*If only we had this and that.*

Here's the question again: Do we believe God will provide what we need to do the ministry God wants done?

We are called to set the table. We may find ourselves setting a table where we think one cannot be set.

*Give what you have to me, Jesus said. Now give them something to eat.* And all were filled. The bread of life was abundant.

After the tornados of Tuesday, there are a lot of amazing stories. I remembered a story from Hurricane Hugo.

After months of hard work and years of saving, the day came for Reb and Jackay to open their own restaurant. All that was needed was the final health inspection and the issuing of their business permit. That was scheduled for first thing that morning; then "Our Place," as they called their restaurant, would be in business.

But that morning the winds and rains of Hurricane Hugo hit, unexpectedly making its way 200 miles inland to their North

Carolina town. Trees were uprooted, power lines were down, homes and stores were destroyed. Reb and Jackay hurried to their restaurant. Everything was intact.

A deputy sheriff pulled up and told them that their restaurant, the fire station next door and a service station down the road were the only ones that had electricity. Reb and Jackay called the health inspector to come immediately so they could open, but because of the power outage, he couldn't get into his office to issue the permit.

No permit, no business opening. With a refrigerator stocked with 300 pounds of bacon and beef and bushels of tomatoes, lettuce and bread, there was only one thing to do: give the food away.

They told the deputy, *Tell your coworkers and other emergency people you see that we'll have free BLT's and coffee for anybody who wants to drop by.* Soon firemen, policemen, linemen and other workers were filing into Our Place.

When the couple heard that another restaurant was gouging people by charging ten dollars for two eggs, toast and bacon, they placed a sign in their window: FREE BLT'S—FREE COFFEE.

Families, travelers and all people were welcomed.

Then something began to happen. People started to clean counters and sweep floors. Volunteers took over the dish washing from Jackay and helped Reb at the grill.

Hearing about what was going on at Our Place from the local radio station, people from a neighboring town that had not been too badly hit by the storm brought food from their freezers. Stores and dairies sent over chicken, milk and foodstuffs of all kinds.

And so the long day went. Those first cups of coffee and BLT's somehow stretched to 16,000 meals. The restaurant's small stock increased by 500 loaves of bread, cases of mayonnaise, 350 pots of coffee and bushels of produce.

*["A grand opening," Connections, 18th Sunday of the Year, August 1, 1999]*

Jesus said, *You give them something to eat.* Set the table. Put out a sign: *Free Food. Free Grace.* Set a table of welcome. Set a table of generosity. And trust that God will supply every need.

God is in the business of taking what we offer and turning it into abundance.