

Sunday, August 3, Twelfth Sunday after Pentecos

More Than Enough

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Matthew 14:13-21

Two summers ago I stepped under a tent to avoid the warm rain in a little backwoods village near Busia, Kenya. We were there as part of a Wilshire group to continue our partnership work with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Buckner International orphan care. (Another group leaves this week, by the way.) We worked with children who had lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. We set up a medical clinic and passed out simple basic drugs and supplies that we take for granted for good health and they have no access to. It's the kind of mind-boggling thing about our world today that you can only really experience when you go and see for yourself. The deprivation of some in our world and the over-indulgence of others can no longer be justified. Even spiritually this exists. I helped train pastors to improve their work of preaching, counseling, and leading their churches. One reason they needed training is that some of the pastors didn't own Bibles. We started there. I am serious. And ministry for some of them was just one step removed from local witch doctors. Yes, they now had Christ to preach, but some of them preached Christ more as magician than miracle-worker. Wherever you find ignorance, you find fear. And wherever you find fear, you find talk of demon-possession and the forces of darkness.

So it was a big challenge to preach in that place, as you might imagine—especially being a white guy without a lot of rhythm or a podium for a carefully edited manuscript so that I can make sure my subjects and verbs agree and I leave no participles dangling. I chose the story of the feeding of the five thousand. And somehow it fit. Somehow I found my voice among them. Somehow they found spiritual food for their souls.

I have preached this story many times: sometimes from Matthew's version, sometimes from one of the other three gospels. It's the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels. But until that moment I had always preached it to people with full stomachs. I was reminded of words of the poet Isaac Rosenberg, who wrote during the First World War and had to face up to the horrors human beings could do to one another. You should never write anything, he said, that would not be true in the presence of burning children. And I wondered if this would be true for them.

And then it occurred to me, it's more about whether it is true for me—a well-fed—no, over-fed, American. The miracle first took place with just such people as these Kenyans. Let's look a little closer.

Jesus has been teaching the crowds by the lakeshore. He had been telling them in every way he knew how—by devising clever parables of all kinds—that God is at work in the world behind the scenes of things. God may be invisible but God is not impotent. There's a power in the world that the world doesn't account for. It's not obvious. It can only be seen through the eyes of faith. But it is nonetheless real and all the more good.

Among the parables Jesus told in the last chapter was about the mustard seed. It grows of itself, no thanks to people. And it turns into something more than it started

out being, just because that's the way God has devised things. Nature is fruitful, Jesus is saying. *The world is charged with the grandeur of God*, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said. No matter what human beings do it, *nature is never spent*, he says. Like the dew that appears each morning on its own from some secret place, *there lives the dearest freshness deep down things*. And God superintends the flourishing of nature in mysterious ways, God's wonders to behold.

But now Jesus has tried to get away from the crowds. Nature may not be spent, but he is. He wants to be by himself for a while, to plug in to the Spirit, to recharge his cells. He gets in a boat and goes to a deserted place. But when he comes ashore, he finds that the people have just followed him by foot. They can't get enough of him. Spent as he is, he sees they have greater needs still. He has compassion on them. He starts to heal their sick. And after a time, the disciples come to him to give him instructions on what to do next.

I love this part. The disciples clearly represent the church in the gospels. And usually, as here, they represent the leadership of the church. Maybe the deacons, don't you know?! They usually speak respectfully to Jesus, saying, *Master* this, or *Lord* that. In this case they just inform him of conditions and tell him what he ought to do. *This is a deserted place*, they say to him. Which is to say, it's not a place where they can see nature coming to their aid. They can't see the dearest freshness deep down things. It's interesting, the word they use. You know how we begin a joke with "A man is on a desert island ..."? *Desertisland?* With all that water around it? Desert? We mean deserted, don't we? But the word doesn't just mean absent of people; it mean absent of anything much. Like a desert place, it's desolate, devoid of resources. And that's what they are saying to Jesus. If these people are going to get anything to feed their stomachs they'll have to go someplace where something is to be found.

Kenyans will have to come to America. Poor people will have to go to the rich. Let them go buy food for themselves, the disciples say. Let them take care of their own needs the way we do. Let the jobless get themselves jobs. Let the single people get themselves married. Let the illiterate go teach themselves to read. Let the sick go get themselves well. Let them do it for themselves.

And Jesus says, They need not go away; you give them something to eat. Ouch.

So, the disciples reply, as if Jesus is still not sufficiently aware of conditions, *We have nothing here...but five loaves and two fish*. We have nothing here. In other words, the first thing they do is look at what they don't have. And isn't that what we do? We go straight to scarcity. We look at what we lack. We are preoccupied with what we don't have.

That's true of the church, even now. We are running an unfriendly budget deficit. We look at what the budget says we need in order to have enough, but we don't look at what we have to see that we have more than enough as it is. We have nothing? Compared to what? We have so much—so much more than enough right here, right now. And that includes what has already been given. But when you count what we have that should have been given but hasn't been given yet, oh my, we are unbelievably wealthy. The reason more hasn't been given is not only because the economy is bad. Please. Listen, there is no such thing as a bad economy. There is no such thing as a good economy. There is only where you are situated at any given moment in the economy. Some of you are admittedly poorly situated in the economy at this moment. You are unemployed or underemployed. You have lost a lot or failed to make what you thought you should. It makes you afraid. It makes you look at what you don't have instead of what you do have.

You probably look at somebody else or someplace else and figure they have more over there. But here, in this desert place you are living, you have nothing. But do you really? Do you have nothing? Or do you just have less than you want? Or less than you think you need?

Turns out the disciples had five loaves and two fish. Not a lot in the face of 5,000 men. (Note Matthew makes the point that that does count women and children. He's trying to tell us that they ought to count from then on.) Jesus wants us to look at what we have rather than at what we don't have. Then he wants us to bring it first to him for blessing and to give it to those that need it more than we.

Whatever you have is not yours. You are only a steward of it. You are a pass-through agent of God. You are in the distribution business not the banking business. Whatever you have must be placed at the disposal of Jesus. And only when it is will it have the power to become more than enough for any and every need you and the rest of the world has.

Notice when they had passed out all the food, there was more than enough for everyone. Everyone ate and was filled. And no one asked where it all came from. That's because we never really can tell, can we? It started out being a lunch of someone—another gospel tells us a small boy. But once it is given to Jesus and distributed according to his command, it becomes more than enough for everyone and no one remembers who gave it to start with. And that's because it was God's work from beginning to end anyway.

If you are not experiencing the miraculous power of God in your life, is it really because God has not given you enough or because you have not given God what you already have? Are you trying to do God's job for God? Are you trying to save and invest for yourself and take care of other people's needs only with the leftovers of your own resources? Well, if you are, then I can tell you that you will never think you have enough to do that. But if you start out obeying Jesus, you will end up collecting twelve baskets full.

Those 12 baskets full do not mean you will prosper more because you have given, as if this is just some new investment scheme like so many TV preachers pitch to you. They mean symbolically that each and every tribe of Israel—in other words, every people under the sun, even those not present then for the miracle—will have their basic needs met if we would all give what we have to Jesus and distribute it as he commands.

When this next group leaves this week for Kenya, they will find life different there now than when we went two years ago. There is a community building with a medical clinic, and a place where basic hygiene is taught. There is a water well and filtration system, so that malaria and other diseases do not rob these people of life. And all of these things and more have come to pass in part because people like you have given what you have to Jesus and it has been distributed to those who have needed it most. The need is still great, but there is something much more there now that is filling them with food for their stomachs and food for their souls.

And it didn't cost us much to do it—only ... five loaves and two fish. But come to think of it, that turns out to be a lot after all—more than enough when put in the hands of Jesus.