Feeding the 5,000

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at Light Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore,
on Sunday, August 3, 2014.

Matthew 14:13-21

I don’t know about you, but I have trouble with miracle stories. Perhaps it’s my post-Enlightenment, scientific worldview that doesn’t want to leave room for the supernatural. Or perhaps it’s my educational background in engineering. I want to understand how things work. So, I want to know how Jesus did it! How did he feed 5,000 men and their families with just five loaves of bread and two fish?

There are a number of ways to understand this story. Some people see it as a nature miracle, an extraordinary act of God in which the loaves and fishes were actually multiplied so that everyone in the crowd could be fed. This is the view with which I, personally, have the most difficulty. It’s not something I can easily get my head around. I want to affirm that all things are possible with God. But if God can intervene in the world, countermanding the laws of nature, why doesn’t God do it more often? Why doesn’t God multiply the loaves and fishes today to feed the millions in the world who are hungry? Why doesn’t God intervene to stop bombs and bullets from finding their targets? Why doesn’t God make greenhouse gases disappear so that the world will no longer be threatened by global climate change? We could use a few more miracles these days!

Another way to understand the story is as a reference to a symbolic meal that Jesus may have had with his followers, in which bits of bread were distributed to the multitudes. Indeed, Matthew’s account seems to echo a communion ritual or agape meal: “Taking the five loaves and the two fish, [Jesus] looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.” The account of such an event could have been embellished and elaborated upon as it was told over and over again through the years of oral tradition. It would be decades before it was finally written down as the miracle story we find recorded in the gospels.

A third way to see this story is as a lesson in sharing. When Jesus distributed the food that the disciples had with them -- the five loaves of bread and two fish -- others in the crowd may have taken out whatever food they had with them and shared it as well, so that in the end there was enough food for everyone. I’ve seen this happen on hikes. You’ll stop for a rest at the side of the trail and take out a bag of nuts to share with other hikers. Then someone else pulls out a bunch of grapes and passes them around. Then another hiker pulls out a chocolate bar to share. And before you know it, you’re all having an unexpected feast!

A fourth way to look at this passage is not as a report of an actual event at all, but as a fictional, symbolic story intended to communicate the meaning of the Christ event as a whole. God comes to us in Jesus Christ to satisfy our physical and spiritual hunger, to feed us -- body and soul. God comes to us in Jesus Christ to meet human need with abundance for all.
So, four ways to understand the feeding of the 5,000: as a nature miracle, as a eucharistic meal, as a lesson in sharing, or as a symbolic story. There may be other interpretations as well. I’m not going to advocate for one over another this morning. I leave it up to you to decide whether you resonate with one interpretation or another.

I do think, though, that this is an important story for us to grapple with, because it apparently had special significance for the early church. Of the 32 different miracle stories found in the gospels, this one -- the feeding of the 5,000 -- is the only one recorded in all four gospels. There was something about it that led all four gospel writers to include it in their accounts of Jesus’ ministry.

I can really relate to Jesus’ small band of disciples in this story. They are with Jesus in the wilderness. Through the course of the day, he’s attracted a crowd of 5,000 men and their families. And now it’s dinner time. So the disciples point out to Jesus that they are in “a deserted place, and the hour is now late;” and they suggest that it might be a good time for him to “send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus says to his disciples: “they need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

The disciples are perplexed, even overwhelmed, by Jesus’ response. “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” They cannot imagine feeding thousands of people given their limited resources.

I have to admit, I’m with the disciples. What on earth is Jesus thinking? How are the disciples supposed to feed 5,000 families with five loaves of bread and two fish? It’s just not possible! But then, Jesus does exactly that! He does the impossible!

Just as the disciples were overwhelmed by the task of feeding the 5,000, so I am overwhelmed by the task of feeding a hungry world. Today, more than 800 million people in the world suffer from hunger. Each year 2.6 million children die as a result of hunger-related causes. Even here in the United States -- still the richest, most powerful country in the world – almost 15% of U.S. households (nearly 49 million Americans) struggle to put food on the table.

Faced with such overwhelming need, I wonder how I can possibly make a dent in the problem of world hunger? What can I do that would make any difference?

And Jesus says, “Give me what you have, even if it doesn’t seem like much -- your time, your talents, your treasure -- and together we will make a difference.”

For some 20 years, this church operated a Hospitality Soup Kitchen, serving meals to as many as 450 hungry and homeless people each week. But over the years, as the church’s neighborhood gentrified and the needs of our immediate neighbors appeared to diminish, it became more and more difficult to find the funding and volunteers to sustain that feeding program. Light Street’s soup kitchen ministry closed its doors about 12 years ago.

This church was also one of the founding congregations behind South Baltimore Emergency Relief (So.B.E.R. for short), an emergency food pantry that served the needs of the hungry and homeless in South Baltimore for 41 years. We supported it with donations of food and money until last year, when it permanently closed its doors for lack of funding.
It used to be that when people came to our church’s door looking for food, I would send them to So.B.E.R. Now, that’s no longer an option. So, now, when people come to the church’s door looking for food, I give out little snack bags with a juice box, some peanut butter and crackers, some raisins, and a granola bar. It’s not much, but it satisfies their immediate hunger and it means I don’t have to send them away empty handed.

A few members of our congregation continue to serve supper once a month at The Baltimore Station, a residential treatment facility for homeless veterans dealing with drug and alcohol addiction. We continue to sponsor collections on a quarterly basis for families being sheltered at the House of Ruth. And each year we participate in Bread for the World’s Offering of Letters. In June, we sent 33 letters to our Members of Congress, urging them to do more to reduce hunger and poverty in the world. But I have to wonder whether we as a congregation also could be doing more.

Earlier this year, I remember being outside the church when a wildly dressed street person came by and simply asked “what do you do to help the needy?” I have to admit that his innocent question stung a little. I didn’t have a good answer. There wasn’t much I could point to. What do we do to help the needy?

Part of our challenge recently has been our lack of a functioning Mission Committee. I am grateful to Oscar Garcia for his willingness to help re-establish our church’s Mission Committee and to serve as its new chair. I am hoping that some of you will join him in that effort, helping to guide and lead our church’s mission into the future.

Presbyterians believe that faith leads directly to action. It has become a Presbyterian axiom: “To believe is to do.” We are a church that is socially engaged. We put our faith into action in the public arena. We work for the common good of all.

That means we seek the health and well-being of other people, not just ourselves. It means we want “liberty and justice for all,” not just for some. Franklin Roosevelt said that “the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

Jesus called upon his disciples to feed thousands. We are being called to feed millions. It may seem impossible. But with Jesus Christ at our side, nothing is impossible. Together with Jesus, we can make a difference. May it be so. Amen.