

2 Kings 4:42-44

Matthew 14:13-21

November 6, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

The Stewardship of ALL of Life
GIVE THEM THEIR DAILY BREAD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Tuesday, July 14, 1992, Bryan Davenport requested an audience with the Session to discuss his “Project Eagle” scouting endeavor. Bryan asked permission to use the church as a base for food distribution to the needy, a project he was developing in connection with work toward the Eagle Scout rank in the Boy Scouts of America. Bryan explained that food would be collected from this church and several other local churches and stored here for distribution at appointed times. Elder Margaret Hall Jones Glasgow made a motion that Bryan be given permission to do this work. Elder Bill Saunders seconded the motion, which was unanimously approved.¹ The original food pantry was housed in the small closet underneath the stairs in the Currie Building.

Twenty-four years later, Bryan’s work continues through our “Helping Hands Food Pantry,” which is now located in a 15 foot x 9 foot custom- built room in the Church Office Building, along with two refrigerators, shelf space in the old manse kitchen, and a hallway closet across from the Margaret Glasgow Sunday School classroom. Perhaps over the years you have donated some canned goods or helped sort food contributions in the Fellowship Hall or handed out bags on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Our Food Pantry team is a well-oiled machine and has the process down to a science — buying, stocking, receiving food from Food Lion and Pizza Hut, bagging, writing grants, and distributing food to folks who have been referred to us from Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries.

On the first Sunday of March, June, September, and December we collect the Presbyterian Answer to Hunger Offering, or P.A.T.H. That money is sent to the Hunger Program of the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina and is used to support feeding programs for children in Haiti and Malawi, as well as to provide grants to food pantries such as ours. The next time you hear the coins clanking in the buckets as they are passed through the pews, you might wonder, “What can a few coins possibly do to help feed people?”

Well, let me tell you. From January through October of this year, our food pantry distributed 476 sets of two bags of food, for a total of 952 bags. The two bags are packed with a variety of items to provide several meals for a family of three or four people. Each two bag set contains approximately 25 items such as cereal or pancake mix and syrup, canned fruit, mac and cheese, PB&J, canned meat, Jell-O, rice or beans, pasta and sauce, vegetables, soups, and personal hygiene items. These 25 items are valued at approximately \$30. This doesn’t include the meats, produce, breads, and

cakes donated from Food Lion and the monthly pizza pick-up from Pizza Hut. Let's do the math. 476 sets x 25 items = 11,900 food items in ten months, for a value of \$14,280.

That one ministry of our congregation should make us stop and think the next time we're tempted to say, "What can we possibly do?" or "How are we supposed to do that?" or "We don't have enough resources." when Jesus tells us to do something in his name.

Out there in the lonely, deserted place, Jesus tells his disciples to do something in his name. Who knows what motivated the disciples to go to Jesus and say, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves"? Maybe they were being altruistic and trying to take care of the people before it got too dark and late. Maybe the twelve were tired after a long day and just wanted to get rid of the crowd so they could kick back and relax and fix *themselves* something to eat. Maybe they had a sneaking suspicion Jesus might ask them to take care of the situation. Maybe they wanted to put the responsibility on Jesus' shoulders to get rid of the crowd.

Whatever their motivation, Jesus *did* tell them to do something in his name. He told his disciples, "They don't need to go away; you give them something to eat." Or, as we say it around here, "Y'all give them something to eat!" Jesus emphasizes the joint effort of the disciples to address the situation.

Before and after Jesus tells them to do something about feeding the crowd, the disciples raise objections and ask questions which, objectively speaking, really aren't that hard-hearted. In fact, they're pretty sensible in light of the size of the crowd and the loneliness of the place.

* We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.

* Are we to go and buy 200 denarii worth of bread and give it to them?

[A denarius was a day's wage, so you're talking about working 8 hours a day from January 1 - July 19 just to feed the people some bread.]

* We have no more than five loaves and two fish — unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.

* Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? [After all, it's not like they could run down to The Pig or Food Lion and clean off the bread shelves, like we do around here when a hurricane is coming.]

* Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.

We work hard to make good, reliable, sensible decisions, including here in the church. After all, when we're charged with being good stewards of peoples' faithful contributions, it's important to evaluate the circumstances and the requirements of the task(s) before us. After all, our Lord himself taught, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'" (Luke 14:28-30)

However, there is a big difference between sitting down and estimating the cost in order to be good stewards of what we have been given, on the one hand and, on the other hand, operating out of a fear of scarcity.

Booker T. Washington, the great African-American educator, often told a story about a ship that was lost at sea in the Atlantic Ocean along the northern coast of South America. After several days of being lost, a friendly ship was sighted. The frantic message went out from the lost ship, "Water, water. We die of thirst!" The return message instructed, "Cast down your buckets where you are." Again, the lost ship signaled, "Water, send us water!" Again, the answer came, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Two more times the lost ship frantically signaled, "Water! Send us water! We die of thirst!" Both times the response was the same, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Finally the captain of the vessel in distress heeded the instruction and cast the ship's bucket down where they were. When the sailors drew up the bucket, they were surprised to find it full of fresh water from the mouth of the Amazon River. The mouth of the Amazon extends miles out into the Atlantic Ocean in what is called the "River Sea."²

Jesus' disciples were realistic and pragmatic. Although many of us learned this story as "Feeding the Five Thousand," Matthew tells us at the end, "And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children." (Mt. 14:21) Just for argument's sake, let's say 2/3 of the 5,000 men brought their wives along with them, with an average of 2 children per couple. Right there you have 14,900 people out in the wilderness in the evening after a long day, ready for something to eat. No wonder the disciples said, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish" when Jesus told them, "Y'all give them something to eat."

We might wonder what tone of voice Jesus used in his response to the disciples' objection. Maybe he was excited and inviting — "Bring them here to me and watch what I'm going to do!" Maybe he was frustrated and shaking his head — "Bring them here to me. I mean, really?!" However Jesus said what he said, we know what Jesus **didn't** do. Jesus **didn't** tell his disciples, "Go on, get out of here! I'll take care of it myself. You guys are useless!" Instead, he said, "Bring the bread and the fish to me." Then, after Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. The disciples were probably right when they thought, "We can't do what Jesus wants us to do on our own." But Jesus never asked them to feed the crowd on their own. He asked them to cast down their bucket where they were.

Each week in worship we pray together, "Give us this day our daily bread." That can mean, "Lord, give us enough for the next day." It's a reminder of how God took care of the Israelites when they were in a lonely, deserted place in the wilderness and were hungry. The Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day." Later on, in his farewell speech to God's people, Moses looked back on those wilderness wanderings and told them, "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with

manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” (Deuteronomy 8:3)

One biblical commentator has compared the story about Jesus and the disciples feeding the 5,000 with the story of Elisha and his servant feeding the 100 people with twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain. Elisha told the man, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” But the servant said, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” (He sounds like the disciples!) Elisha told him again, “Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’” (2 Kings 4:42-44)

The writer notes, “as Elisha performed this miracle through the agency of his servant, so Jesus involves his disciples in the multiplication of bread and fish. . . [this] undoubtedly reminded early Christians that they had been called to be God’s instruments in meeting the needs of others. . . the command is emphatic: ‘**You**, you give [the food] to them to eat!’ The prayer ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ requires active participation from those who wish to see it answered.”³

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the slang term “bread” for money back to the sense of “livelihood and means of subsistence.” Obviously we need both kinds of bread — for our physical strength and nourishment, and for our livelihood. But, as Moses told the Israelites, “We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord,” and as Jesus reminded us last week, “Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food?”

In a few minutes, you will be invited to come forward and pick up an envelope of information that has been carefully prepared for you by your elders and the Stewardship and Finance Ministry Team. The packet contains a Ministry & Mission booklet and a 2017 narrative Mission Budget. These two documents will show you how you can be involved in the mission of our congregation, how your generous and faithful contributions are used, and how we try to give people their daily bread. As we remember how richly God has blessed us in our lives and in this church, we hear once again Jesus telling us, “Y’all give them something to eat.”

Our first response might be like the disciples’ reaction, “Who? Us? How are we supposed to do that, Jesus? We have so little!”

But Jesus tells us, just like he tells his disciples, “Cast down your buckets where you are and bring them here to me.”

Let us pray: Dear God, we are the hands and feet of Christ, serving by grace each other’s need. We dare to risk and sacrifice with truthful word and faithful deed. Dear God, we have been given so much. Help us to express our thankfulness for this abundance by serving others and giving them their daily bread. Amen.

NOTES

¹This information is taken from the minutes of the Session of the Wallace Presbyterian Church, July 14, 1992.

²This story can be found on numerous websites about Booker T. Washington, particularly about his Atlanta Compromise Speech of 1895. The information in the sermon was found in “Feeding the 5,000: Not Just Another Church Potluck,” by Alyce M. McKenzie, July 15, 2012 at www.patheos.com.

³Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 167.