

1 Kings 17:1-16

Matthew 15:29-39

October 8, 2017

Camp Kirkwood Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at Camp Kirkwood, Watha, NC

MORE THAN ENOUGH FOOD FOR SO MANY PEOPLE

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.

Last Sunday morning, I went downstairs at my sister's house. She was busy in the kitchen, getting ready for the brunch for nineteen people. "Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked. Susan put me to work: peeling and halving a dozen hard-boiled eggs; slicing banana bread; and putting cookies on a serving plate. She was busy cooking the quiche and the miniature cheesecakes. Then my niece arrived, and I arranged some of the leftovers that Emily brought from the birthday party on Saturday – a veggie tray and cheese dollars in a bowl. A few minutes later, my other niece, Georgia (from New York City) arrived with her family. She contributed a delicious chocolate babka from Zabar's Jewish Deli on Broadway. (I've already checked out their website to find out how to order this heavenly delight!) When all of the food was laid out, Susan said, "I hope there's enough for everybody." Despite repeated trips to the serving tables, no one appeared to go hungry. And there were plenty of leftovers!

A lot of planning and preparation went into making sure there was enough food for so many people at my mother's birthday party on Saturday evening and at the brunch on Sunday morning. A lot of planning and preparation went into making sure there will be enough food for so many people here at Kirkwood today. We've been taking lunch reservations for six weeks, so we could give Luke Dooley a final headcount last Monday. Folks were calling and e-mailing right up to the deadline. First it was fifty something – then sixty-two – then our final count of seventy-four. The kitchen staff needed to know how many supplies to buy to provide more than enough food for so many people.

There was also planning and preparation for coming to the Lord's table this morning. Earlier this week I e-mailed Harriet and told her I would like to have one long loaf of bread and two cups for communion. I also suggested we have a separate tray of cups and bread for anyone who isn't comfortable tearing and dipping. Today we have a gluten free option for anyone who needs it. We don't want anyone to be excluded from the communion at the Lord's table. I e-mailed Harriet a headcount of sixty-two. Then I had to send her another e-mail and tell her, "The final count is up to seventy-four." There will certainly be more than enough bread and juice for so many people when we celebrate the sacrament in a few minutes.

What do you reckon the disciples were thinking when Jesus told them, "I feel sorry for this big crowd. They've been out here for three days and must be really hungry. I hate to send them away hungry"? He didn't actually tell the disciples to give

the people something to eat, but that's apparently what they heard. "How are we supposed to get enough food to feed so great a crowd?" they asked him. How indeed?

One day I was eating a delicious lunch of fish and tortillas at a small church in the countryside of Tabasco, Mexico. My friend, travel companion, and avid fisherman, Dr. Ricky Watson, leaned over and said, "Did you know you're eating the same kind of fish Jesus ate?" We were eating tilapia, one of the three main types of fish caught in the Sea of Galilee in New Testament times and still today. They are called *Tilapia galilea*, also known as "St. Peter's fish."

Let's suppose those "few small fish" the disciples had that day were tilapia, along with the seven loaves of fish. How much food was enough for so many people? I crunched a few numbers, based on Matthew's report that 4,000 men were served. Here's what I came up with:

- If every man got one fish, at .66 pound per tilapia, that is 4,000 fish or 2,640 pounds.
- If every man got two slices of bread (work with me here, think about a 24 ounce loaf of sandwich bread), that would be 8,000 slices of bread, or 400 loaves.
- At \$3.51 per pound, the tilapia would cost \$9,266.40. At \$1.38 per loaf, the bread would cost \$552.

Of course, that only feeds 4,000 men. Matthew tells us there were also hungry women and children there that day. So, the \$9,800 + change would be the minimum charge. Let's assume one woman and three children for each man (based on the average size of the nuclear family in New Testament times). Now we're talking 20,000 people that needed to be fed with 13,200 pounds of tilapia, at a cost of \$46,332 and 2,000 loaves of bread, at a cost of \$2,760. And that's just to give each person one fish and two slices of bread. Matthew tells us "all of them ate and were filled." Who knows how many fish and how much bread the hungry people actually ate that day?

Last Sunday we enjoyed some leftovers from Saturday's party. I wonder what those folks by the Sea of Galilee did with the leftovers. ("Jesus, can I get a box to take some home?") I guesstimated 392 pounds of fish (593) and 261 loaves of bread were left over that day. There was **more** than enough food for so many people. And that's the point, isn't it? When we put our trust in Jesus and depend on him to help us use what we have to do what we're called to do, we will always discover that there's **more** than enough (even if our reality is only seven loaves of bread and a few small fish).

Just one chapter earlier in his gospel, Matthew tells the story about Jesus feeding the 5,000 men, besides women and children. The disciples had already seen Jesus take the little they had (five loaves and two fish) and feed the multitudes. Why in the world did they doubt he could do it again? One Bible commentator has explained the disciples' reaction with what he calls the "doctrine of Christian amnesia."¹ The disciples forget how competent and able Jesus was to take care of his people.

We suffer from the same malady, don't we? Jesus calls us to undertake some task or engage in some ministry or care for some people, and we ask, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" Jesus, where are we to get

enough money, people, time, energy, vision, enthusiasm, commitment, whatever to do what you're asking us to do? We forget that Jesus always provides enough – **more** than enough – to do what needs to be done.

On the other hand, just as we too often suffer from “Christian amnesia,” we all too often act as if we're totally self-sufficient. That reminds me of the joke about the scientists who thought they had figured out how to make life from dirt, just as described in the book of Genesis. They decided to challenge God to a contest. They told God, “We've figured out how to make life out of dirt, just like in Genesis.” “Oh yeah?” asked God, “Show me.” The scientists bent down and started to gather some dirt to put in a bucket. Just then God interrupted them. “Hold it! Stop right there!” boomed God. The scientists looked up and asked, “What?” God demanded, “What are you doing?” “We're gathering some dirt to make life, just like you did in Genesis.” God just laughed and said, “Get your own dirt.”

Feeding the 4,000 (20,000?) is a warning against “Christian amnesia” and against our inflated sense of self-sufficiency. A large group of tired, hungry people out in a desert, with nothing to eat – that sounds a lot like another group of God's people, wandering in the wilderness and grumbling that God didn't care about them or wasn't able to take care of them. After God provided for their needs so that everyone had enough to eat, he reminded them through Moses, “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)

You might wonder why there are two stories in the gospels about Jesus feeding such great crowds of people. Other than the stories about the resurrection, the feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle story that is found in all four gospels. Naturally, that story gets more attention than today's story about Jesus feeding the 4,000 (also found in Mark 8:1-10).

Some people point to Jesus being up on the mountain again, curing many people and feeding them, just as he was up on the mountain at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, to deliver his Sermon on the Mount. Others have commented that the story about feeding the 4,000 seems to be about the Gentiles, rather than the Jews. Matthew 15:31 says, “They praised the God of Israel.” If that's talking about Jews, someone said it would be like saying, “The Christians praised the God of the Christians.” Also, the seven loaves and the seven baskets of leftovers remind some people of the seven deacons who were appointed in the early church to take care of the needs of the Gentile believers (Acts 6:1-6).

Some have called the Feeding of the 5,000 the “Jewish Lord's Supper,” and the Feeding of the 4,000 the “Gentile Lord's Supper.” Whether or not that's what Matthew had in mind when he included these two stories in his gospel, there is no mistaking the sacramental language used to describe what Jesus did when he fed the people until they were satisfied – “he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.” (Matthew 15:36) Took . . . Gave thanks . . . Broke . . . Gave. That sounds a lot like what

Jesus did when he instituted the Lord's Supper with his disciples. That sounds a lot like what we will do when we come to the Lord's table today. In a few minutes, you will be invited to tear a piece of bread and dip it in the cup. None of us here thinks that little chunk of bread and bit of juice will satisfy us, at least physically. Shortly after we eat the bread at the Lord's table, we will climb the hill and sit down to a delicious Sunday lunch. My guess is we'll all have plenty to eat and will be satisfied when we leave the table. However, most if not all of us will head to the refrigerator or go somewhere for supper tonight.

But the bread we eat at the Lord's table is more than enough food for so many people. The people by the Sea of Galilee ate until they were satisfied, and still there were leftovers. God's people by the lake at Camp Kirkwood will be satisfied in the communion of the body and blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. And still God's grace will be abundant and there will be plenty left over.

Come to the table of grace . . .

All of you eat and be filled . . .

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Let us pray: Gracious God, thank you for feeding us with your Word, and for welcoming us to your table of grace. May we always put our trust in you, through Jesus Christ, who is the True Bread come down from heaven. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary – Volume 2 – The Churchbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).