

**Psalm 23**

**Mark 6:30-44**

**September 22, 2019**

**Kirkwood Sunday**

**The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at Camp Kirkwood, Watha, NC*

## **DO WHAT, JESUS?!**

***Let us pray: God of love, who renews us at the table of grace, prepare us to receive the feast of your wisdom through the illumination of your Spirit. Nourish our souls with your Word that we may learn how to love our neighbors as you have love due through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

Here we are at the lakeside, seeking some “get away time,” fellowship, and good food. According to the Wilmington YMCA’s website, “For more than 50 years, Camp Kirkwood has welcomed campers, providing a chance to escape the distraction of modern life and experience God’s breath-taking natural world through exploration and adventure.” We’re not exactly in a “deserted place” since we are halfway between Wallace and Burgaw. But these 195 acres of land and 10 acre lake offer us a wonderful opportunity to get away, to have some R&R from the regular schedule, to come to the Lord’s table, and to gather around the table of fellowship in the Dining Hall. In more than one way, we will be fed in this beautiful place.

2,000 years ago, another group of God’s people gathered by a lake in northwest Galilee. There is no indication they had to make reservations ahead of time, so the disciples had no way to prepare an evening meal for the huge crowd. In fact, Jesus and the twelve didn’t expect to meet such a crowd out there in the deserted place. After all, they went out to the deserted place “by themselves” for a staff retreat. The disciples had been on a mission trip. They were tired but pumped up with enthusiasm because of what they had done and taught. Quite naturally, they wanted to share their experiences with Jesus who had sent them out on the mission.

But the demands of ministry didn’t let up, even out there in that deserted place. I once read a story about a seminary student who was an intern at a Catholic soup kitchen in a large city. He and the other volunteers had worked non-stop serving the evening meal to an overflowing crowd. When the last person finally left and they had cleaned up the kitchen, he was standing with the priest as he got ready to lock the door for the night. Just then, they saw another street person coming up the steps. The seminary intern, already exhausted and overwhelmed, muttered under his breath, “Jesus Christ!” The priest replied, “He just might be, he just might be” as he opened the door and welcomed the man.

Let’s be honest: Who among us wouldn’t have done the same thing as the disciples in the face of such need? Mark specifically tells us that when Jesus saw the great crowd, he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. It may be unfair to the twelve to suggest they were not compassionate when they told

Jesus to send the people into the neighboring villages to fend for themselves. After all, they recognized the hour was late and the people were hungry.

But the disciples' plan was thwarted by Jesus' command — "You give them something to eat!" The sense of the imperative is even more emphatic — "You give them something to eat! I mean you!" Again, let's be honest: Who among us wouldn't have had the same reaction as the disciples? "Do what, Jesus?! You can't be serious — there must be at least 5,000 people out here. Do you know how much it would cost to feed them even just a bite or two of bread? You know we don't carry any money with us. In fact, you told us not to take anything with us when we go out — no bread and no money in our belts. It's not like we have eight months worth of wages on us, Jesus. We probably couldn't scrape up that much money among all the people gathered here tonight."

The disciples might not have had eight months' wages on hand, but they weren't empty handed. Instead of telling the twelve, "Go on, get out of here — I'll take care of it myself," Jesus said, "How much bread do you have? Go and see." This may be the most important point of this story. When we're faced with a challenge and need, especially in the church, our first reaction is all too often the same as the disciples' — "Do you really expect us to do that, Jesus? We don't have enough \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank: money, time, energy, people, volunteers, courage, etc., etc.)." But Jesus didn't go there with the disciples. He asked them to look at what they already had, not at what they didn't have.

Even then, it's not as if the disciples sheepishly came back, kicking the dirt with their feet, and reported to Jesus, "Well, Lord, it turns out we actually do have enough money to feed everybody here tonight." Nope, at least they were honest (even if still skeptical and wondering what was going on) when they told Jesus, "We've got five loaves of bread. Oh, and we also have two fish."

Notice that Jesus still doesn't dismiss the disciples from the job at hand. Instead, he enlists them in the ministry before them. He put the twelve in charge of organizing the feeding groups and sitting them down on the green grass — the sheep without a shepherd are now being led into green pastures by the Good Shepherd.

And Jesus continues to involve the twelve in the feeding ministry. Listen again to how Mark describes what happens — "he took the five loaves — he blessed the five loaves — he broke the five loaves — he gave the five loaves to the disciples." Eight chapters later in Mark's story, he tells us, "While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'" (Mark 14:22) In a few minutes, as we come to the Lord's table, in obedience to our Lord Jesus and in remembrance of him, we will take the loaf, bless the loaf, break the loaf, eat the loaf. Physically we may have to wait until we go to the Dining Hall for lunch to eat and be filled, but, as our Prayer for Illumination reminds us, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

At the beginning of the story, we heard that "many were coming and going, and [the disciples and Jesus] had no leisure even to eat." (Mark 6:31) By the end of the story, there were enough leftovers for each disciple to have a big basket of bread and fish. They were probably just as hungry as the multitude in that deserted place — physically

and spiritually. If they had spent eight months' wages on bread (if they could even find that much bread in the surrounding villages), each of them would have had a little nibble. Instead, they ate and they were filled — in more ways than one.

“You give them something to eat — I mean you!” Jesus' imperative command comes to us today just as it confronted the twelve out there in that deserted place by the lake. And, unfortunately, our response is very much like the disciples' response — “Do what, Jesus?! Where are we supposed to get the resources we need to do what you're asking us to do?” If Jesus' command “You give them something to eat” is the same today, then certainly his response is the same, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.”

There are plenty of ministries based on multiplying a few resources into many. For instance, the quarterly P.A.T.H. (Presbyterian Answer to Hunger) offering we take in March, June, September, and December is sometimes called 2¢ per Meal Offering. 2¢ is even smaller than five loaves and two fish. But if you crunch the numbers just for our congregation, 6¢ per day for a year could yield almost \$2,200 for the presbytery Hunger Program. If you crunch the numbers for the entire presbytery, the total would be approximately \$440,000 for feeding programs in Malawi and Haiti and congregational feeding programs such as our own Helping Hands Food Pantry.

For several years, Nancy and I made a contribution to Heifer International for my mom's Christmas present. She told us she didn't need any more “things” in her room. We might buy her a flock of chicks or geese or ducks or three schools of fish or a pig or some rabbits. Of course, the animals didn't end up in her room at the Gracemont Assisted Living Facility. Instead, the animal donations supported the lives of people in need. According to the Heifer International website, “Giving an animal is like giving someone a small business, providing wool, milk, eggs and more. Animal donations can provide families a hand up, increasing access to medicine, school, food and a sustainable livelihood.”

Heifer International was founded about eighty years ago by a Midwestern farmer named Dan West. As a member of the Church of the Brethren, he had volunteered in the Spanish Civil War. His job was to provide refugees with a single cup of milk. When he returned to the States, he realized American farmers had resources that many people in the world did not have. He based Heifer International on the idea of “not a cup, but a cow.” This idea is similar to the old saying, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

In our Prayer of Confession this morning, we prayed, “Lord, we come believing in our emptiness, believing that we will never have enough, believing that what we have is unworthy.” What if, when we hear the Lord say “You give them something to eat — I mean you!” our first response was trusting God to provide what we will need to do the job he calls us to do? Instead of operating from a fear of scarcity, what if we trusted God to take what we already have and use it and us to achieve great things? What if, instead of fretting about what we don't readily have, we take stock of the blessings God has already given us, take them to him, entrust them to his blessing, and ask him to show us how to use them for his purposes and always to his glory?

In 1895, Booker T. Washington addressed the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. As he encouraged whites and blacks to work together and recognize each other's worth and contributions, he told this story: "A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: 'Water, water. We die of thirst.' The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back: 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' A second time, the signal: 'Water, send us water!' went up from the distressed vessel. And was answered: 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' A third and fourth signal for water was answered: 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River."<sup>1</sup>

Did you know that the outflow of fresh water from the Amazon River is so great that you can draw up fresh, drinkable water at a great distance from shore, where the Amazon River empties into the Atlantic Ocean? The area is called the "River Sea." As one preacher has put it, "In this story a ship full of people had an urgent need for fresh water, and it was closer at hand than they knew."<sup>2</sup>

We have our share of challenges and opportunities as the Wallace Presbyterian Church. In-house, we need to make many costly repairs to the church physical plant, due to the damage from Hurricane Florence last fall. We also have lost quite a few beloved members who have moved on to other places as a result of the storm. After twelve months, the session has a better idea of the effect all of this has and will have on the church finances. You'll notice the announcement in today's bulletin about the covered dish luncheon on Sunday, November 3. Yes, we're already advertising six weeks ahead of time because we want to get the word out. This will be an opportunity for all of us to be informed about important decisions made and work to be done.

But it's not just about us. There are many needs all around us — just as daunting and overwhelming as feeding 5,000 people in a deserted place, when all you have is five loaves and two fish. The challenge of this miracle story is also the hope and opportunity of this story — Jesus saying, "You give them something to eat — I mean you!" Just as Jesus didn't reject and neglect his disciples' meager efforts and resources, neither does he reject and neglect what we have to offer. Instead, he tells us "Go and find out what you have and bring them to me." In other words, "Cast down your bucket where you are."

When you tear the piece of bread from the loaf and dip it in the cup at the Lord's table this morning, you know that it won't satisfy your physical hunger. But coming to the table and meeting the Lord there — bringing what resources we have, including our very lives — we find that we are blessed to be a blessing. At the Lord's table, we can all eat and be filled with God's Holy Spirit. And, wonder of wonders, there are even baskets and baskets of leftovers to share, if we only will.

***Let us pray: Faithful God, we praise you for feeding our hunger for bread and for "the bread of life." We praise you for taking our little basket of bread and fish and using it to feed others. We call upon you, Lord, to empower us as we declare who you are to a world who needs you. We call***

***upon you, Lord, to inspire us as we seek to inspire others. We call upon you, Lord, to strengthen us in our own weakness. We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Booker T. Washington, "Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are": Book T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise Speech at [www.historymatters.gmu.edu](http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu).

<sup>2</sup>Alyce McKenzie, "Feeding the 5,000: Not Just Another Church Potluck," July 15, 2012 at [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com).