“Scarcity and Abundance”

Matthew 14:13-23

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John the Baptist has just been executed and Jesus is made aware – he grieves for his friend but also realizes his fate will be similar. He goes to be alone, but of course the crowds follow him. Rather than turn them away, he has compassion and heals those who are sick. Evening approaches and the disciples tell Jesus to send them away so they can find food for themselves. Jesus has a different idea…

A grumpier person would send the crowds away. It’s quite clear Jesus wanted to be alone. To spend time in his grief and reflect upon the recent events. Matthew tells us that Jesus got in a boat and went to a remote place. Far from the crowds. Out of reach. But the moment he came ashore, they were all waiting for him. They found him, even in that deserted place where he thought he would find solitude.

A grumpier person would send the crowds away. But not Jesus. He welcomes the crowds and lets them hang around him. They have all heard about John the Baptist’s execution. Perhaps this event made them believe even more that Jesus was the real deal. Why would King Herod feel so threatened by John and Jesus if they weren’t the real deal?

And so thousands flock to Jesus, wanting to be near him. Wanting to learn from him. Wanting to be healed by him. He doesn’t disappoint. He spends the entire day with them, healing their sick and comforting them in their fears.

The disciples are there too, trying to keep the crowds in line. Making sure they don’t harass Jesus. Night approaches and the disciples have had enough. They get grumpy and want the crowds to leave. Perhaps they were getting hangry – that ugly feeling people get when they haven’t eaten and their blood sugar gets low. Think of those Snickers commercials were people transform into angry people when they get hungry. Eat a candy bar and they return to normal. The disciples seem to be in need of food. Suppertime seems like the perfect opportunity to send the crowds away so that they and Jesus can have some peace and quiet. The crowds aren’t going to listen to the disciples, so they ask Jesus to send them away.

Jesus, being sinless and perfect, does not appear to get hangry. He doesn’t mind the crowds being around him. Evidently solitude is not what Jesus needs. He tells the disciples that the crowds can stay. And the disciples should feed them. All 10,000 of them. I would love to have seen the looks on the disciples’ faces. They must have thought Jesus had gone mad. Perhaps too much time in the sun was making his head fuzzy. The disciples know they can’t feed all of those people. They only have 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. It’s barely enough to feed the 13 of them. How in the world are they going to feed all of those people?

The problem is the disciples are focused on scarcity. They looked at what they have and decide it isn’t enough. They can’t see how those 5 loaves and 2 fish could satisfy the hunger of all those people. They can’t see the reality of abundance as Jesus sees it.

This text is challenging because it doesn’t explicitly say what happens next. There are two interpretations of what Jesus does with the bread and fish. The first interpretation is a miraculous regeneration, where Jesus turns them into a multitude. In this reading, Jesus takes those 5 loaves and the 2 fish and turns them into thousands of loaves and fishes. In this interpretation, the miracle lies in Jesus’ ability to transform a little into a lot. As if by magic, making more food appear.

This reminds me of a skit that is performed at Esther’s Follies on 6th street in Austin. The actress plays Patsy Cline, singing a song. While she does so, she pulls seemingly endless items out of her dress. There’s a telephone, a pair of crutches. And an assortment of odds and ends that seem to fit impossibly in her dress. The audience always responds with boisterous laughter at this skit, because of the absurdity of it!

The miraculous regeneration of food from Jesus likewise gets a big reaction. To think that this person can perform such a miracle and feed the masses. It’s quite astounding.

This is a perfectly fine interpretation of the text. It’s what I believed about it as a child and didn’t question the nature of the miracle. I just assumed, sure Jesus would feed all of those people.

But this is a very neat and tidy way to look at this story. It puts all of the responsibility on Jesus, who is indeed quite capable of feeding that big crowd. But it doesn’t really help us today in a world of scarcity where there are millions of people who don’t have enough. Why doesn’t Jesus return and fix all of the world’s problems? Eradiating poverty and hunger. Making sure that the poor are taken care of? To read this text in a way that places all of the work in Jesus’ hands poses a problem for us today. It limits our thinking and convinces us that Jesus is the only one who can feed the hungry and care for the poor. Sure a poor person can pray for food, but it isn’t likely to just appear.

There’s another way to understand this story. One that doesn’t involve a miraculous regeneration of food for the crowd. Instead, it involves a miraculous moment of sharing.

Jesus tells the disciples to feed the crowd. He doesn’t say he’ll do it himself. The disciples reveal what they have and they point out that it isn’t enough. Knowing better than them, Jesus takes what they have to offer and he blesses it. Then he gives those 5 loaves and the 2 fish back to the disciples so that they can give them to the crowds. The text does not tell us that Jesus turns that little bit of food into enough to feed everyone. It just says that he blesses it and hands it back to the disciples so that they may feed the people.

The disciples do so. They take what little they have and they pass it to their neighbors. They offer that small bit of food and make sure others are fed. To read this story as a miraculous sharing story, implies that the people in the crowd saw what the disciples were doing. They saw these men sharing what little they had. And the crowd did likewise. Each person who had some bread or fish in their satchel, brought it out and passed it to those around them. Surely most of the people in the crowd brought food with them when they went to see Jesus. If they’re like me, they don’t leave home without a snack in case the outing lasts longer than anticipated.

All of these people bring out what they have and share with their neighbors. They follow the disciples’ lead and share with their neighbors, making sure everyone is fed. They move from and attitude of scarcity to a community of abundance. All because they pool their resources and are willing to give what they have to others.

There was a powerful example of miraculous sharing this week in Detroit, Michigan. A newspaper there told the story of James Robertson who has a rather long commute to work. His car had quit working and the bus system does not go out near his house. Needing to get to work each day, he walks 8 miles in the morning and 13 miles in the evening. 5 days a week. He barely makes enough money to get buy, so he didn’t have any other options. He never seemed to complain about it and he was willing to do what it takes to show up to work.

A colleague of his spread the word about his story and the media caught on. Last Sunday he was featured on the front page of a local newspaper. It was spread around the internet and went viral within a day. People were inspired by Robertson’s story and felt compelled to help him out. By that evening, more than $80,000 dollars had been raised to help Robertson buy a new car and provide him a more stable situation. During this past week, many others have stepped forward and offered to give him their cars. Most of the donations haven’t come from wealthy people. They have come from people who have experienced hardship in their lives and wanted to help.

Miraculous sharing like this happens frequently in our world. A family’s house catches fire and the neighbors pool their resources to help rebuild. A community is devastated by the economy, and neighboring towns offer help. A child falls ill and the parents have to quit their jobs to care for their little one. Friends and family help keep the household going.

Miraculous sharing isn’t about relying on Jesus to do all of the work. It isn’t about expecting him to feed the hungry while we stand by and watch. Jesus calls us to feed our neighbors, to care for those in need. This puts the responsibility on us as the body of Christ to share what we have, even if it isn’t very much, and make sure all are fed. When one suffers, Jesus calls us, his disciples to step forward and bring what we have. He will bless whatever we bring and ensure that it transforms from scarcity to abundance. Because others will catch on and follow our lead. They’ll be inspired to offer what they have and with everyone’s resources pooled together, a tremendous impact will be made. This is what miraculous sharing looks like.

This is what life in the Kingdom of God looks like! This is what we are called to pursue. The miracle lies in our willingness to obey Jesus’ command to feed the hungry. And so we bring forth what little we have, even if it is just one loaf of bread. We show abundant compassion to someone who desperately needs that loaf of bread. And in the process, we show them Christ’s love.