

MIRACULOUS BEGINNINGS

Sermon, July 22, 2018

Text: Mark 6:30-44

As many of you know, there are only two of the many miracles of Jesus that are recorded by all four Gospel writers. The first is the one we celebrate every Easter, and that is the miracle of the Resurrection. All four Gospels contain an account of that. The only other miracle to be recorded by all four Gospel writers is the one we just read, this miraculous feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish; we find it here in Mark 6, and in Matthew 14, Luke 9, and John 6. Of all the many miracles and wonders performed by Jesus, this is the only one other than the Resurrection itself to be recorded by all four Gospels, by inference giving this miracle very high ranking! No doubt about it; the Gospel writers believed it was a truly miraculous event *(at this point, I adlibbed about a few various renditions of how some sought to explain away this miracle that I've heard over the years: I'll include one in this footnote).*¹

To give a little background on the setting: From Mark and Matthew's accounts we read how John the Baptist had just been executed; he was shamefully and somewhat whimsically murdered by King Herod. Upon hearing this tragic news, it would be entirely understandable that Jesus and His disciples desire to be alone. Also, the disciples have just returned from their first venture out into the world, having been sent out two by two, so they are emotionally and physically spend. Mark tells us that *"... so many people were coming and going that they didn't even have a chance to eat, so Jesus said to them, 'Come with me to a quiet place and let's get some rest.' "* They are tired, they are grieving, and so they travel by boat to a remote place on the Sea of Galilee. However, upon arrival, they discover a huge crowd gathered there awaiting them. Mark tells us how some people saw them leaving, and followed them on foot along the coastline, gathering people as they progressed ... as the Sea of Galilee is actually just a large inland lake, it would be relatively easy for the crowd to do that. We know the crowd was large, at least five thousand strong ... but Matthew includes a little specific detail that this number did not include the women and children who were also present; they weren't counted. There easily may have been as many as ten or fifteen or even twenty thousand people waiting there for these weary, tired and grieving men who simply wanted to be alone for a while. But their plans to be alone were put on hold. So, Mark tells us Jesus began teaching them many things. By this time it was late in the day, and the disciples came to Jesus and said *"Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."*

But Jesus answered, *"You give them something to eat!"*

The last time we looked at this miracle, we looked at it in the Gospel of John. John adds the little detail that at this point, Jesus turned to Philip and, perhaps with a bit of a twinkle in His eye, said, *"So, where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"* Or, *"How we will give them their fill, Phil?"* Philip's response was to say, in so many words, *"What do you mean, we?! Eight month's wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have even a small bite!"*

Phillip's response was to produce statistics to show what could not be done. Overwhelmed by the size of the need, his response was to focus on what they did not have, to whine about they didn't have. We all know people like that, don't we? None of us here do that, of course, but we know people who do ... people whose usual response to difficulty and challenge is to call attention to what they don't have, to focus more on what's wrong than on what's right, to go on and on about whatever life has not given them to meet the crowd of demands in their lives.

Well, if Philip's response was to focus on what they didn't have, then Andrew's response was to at least count what they *did* have. John's account tells us Andrew said, *"Well, wait a minute. Here's a boy with five barley loaves and two fish."* Andrew's response was to call attention to what they did have; he assessed their assets,

¹ From <https://churchlife.nd.edu/2017/11/17/can-you-square-the-feeding-of-the-5000-with-science> *"In middle school, I attended a Mass in which the homilist claimed that the feeding of the five thousand was not a miracle at all, or, if it was, it was simply a "miracle" of human kindness. According to this interpretation, Jesus does not miraculously multiply five loaves and two fishes to feed five thousand people (with twelve baskets of food left over), but rather, his teachings about loving one's neighbor prompts his followers to share food that they have already brought with them, and thus, all five thousand are fed. Not only does this interpretation directly contradict certain statements of the text, such as the fact that Jesus himself distributes the food, but it portrays a very concerning conception of God. Do we really want a God who can be explained simply by human kindness? Shouldn't the actions and motives of an infinite God, Love himself, be at least somewhat beyond the reach of our explanations?"*

meager as they were, and offers them in faith to Jesus. Andrew says, in so many words, "Let's at least see what we do have, and let's bring it to Jesus, and see what He can do! Let's trust Him for a miracle!" Sure, we may be sorry that we don't have more to bring, but that is no reason for failing to bring to Jesus what we do have! So Andrew brings the boy with his meager offering to Jesus, then asks, "But how far will this go among so many?"

Jesus reply to Andrew's question? "Have the people sit down." And the disciples do so! Mark and Luke record for us that the disciples seat the people in groups of fifty. "Let's do this decently and in order. Get the people organized, have them sit in groups of fifty and a hundred, and prepare them to receive a meal." Perhaps they are thinking to themselves, "We don't know *how* Jesus is going to do this, it just doesn't make sense, it's not ... reasonable. But, Jesus says have the people get ready, so ... let's get them ready to eat!"

We then read in Mark 6:41: "Taking the five loaves and two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to His disciples to set before the people; He also divided the two fish among them all." Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish in His hands, and He gives thanks to God for these provisions. He's holding such meager resources in front of this multitude of need and gives thanks to God for what He has. And notice, it is *then* the miracle begins.

Note that He doesn't create food out of thin air to feed the hungry, nor did He turn rocks into bread as He was tempted to do by the devil in the wilderness. No, He takes the very real food that is offered by His followers, gives thanks to God for the resources they gave him, and those resources are in turn multiplied by God ... because they are freely offered with gratitude through Jesus Christ. Jesus takes the offered food, gives thanks, breaks the loaves, and then gives the food to the disciples to distribute. And it appears that it was in the hands of the disciples the miracle took place; the loaves and fish multiply in their hands as they distribute the ever-increasing supply. They give what they have, Jesus offers their offerings in gratitude, and their meager offerings are multiplied and become a source of blessing for many through their ministry of faithful service in obedience to Jesus Christ. They never seem to run out.

I believe that principle carries on to this day. God still chooses to deliver blessing beyond measure to a needy world through the faithful offerings of His grateful followers given to Him through Jesus Christ. We read that all five or ten or fifteen or twenty thousand eat their fill, with twelve baskets full of bread and fish left over.

One way of looking at this miracle is to see it as a powerful display of the credentials of Jesus, who claims to be the Bread of Life, but I'll save that for another sermon someday. Suffice it to say for now, Jesus made several astounding claims, and again and again He would demonstrated His authority to make such claims through His miracles. For example, John 11 records that Jesus claimed, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," then He displayed that by raising Lazarus from the dead and by Himself raising from the dead. He really is the Resurrection and the Life, He is the One who holds power over life and death;

Another way of looking at this miracle is to see it as a demonstration of how God can bless and multiply even the most meager offering given in gratitude, which is what we've focused on in the short time we had this morning. We all have limitations, just like all of Jesus' disciples. And at some time or another, in some form or another, each one of us will face a needy crowd, figuratively or literally, and that crowd may threaten to overwhelm us ... it may be a crowd of needy kids at home (*it may be one needy child who just seems like a crowd*), it may be a crowd of impossible demands at the workplace, it may be a crowd of expectations from so many people who want something from you, it may be a crowd of obligations overwhelming your resources and time, it may be a "crowd" of difficult medical diagnoses ... and you just don't believe you have the resources to take care of that crowd.

When such a crowd threatens to overwhelm us, there are basically two options. Like Phillip, we can whine about our limitations. We can focus on what we don't have, we can focus on whatever life has not given us, as we throw up our hands in despair and try to make the crowd go away. But the grim reality is that the crowd, whatever it is, will not go away. Or, like Andrew, we can spend time counting our limitations, taking inventory of what we do have, and lay it all out before Jesus ... and give thanks to God that at least we have something to offer.

Put what you have in the hands of Jesus Christ, and do so with gratitude that you have something to give ... and trust Him for the miracle. Trust that God can do the most miraculous things through those who freely offer what they have to God in gratitude.