

$$5 + 2 \times 1 = \dots 12?$$

Sermon, July 25, 2021

Texts: Mark 6:30-44; Ephesians 3:14-21

When does  $5 + 2 \times 1 = 12$ ? Mathematically, never. Usually any number times one is itself. But in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, the multiplication formula works out differently: five loaves of barley bread, plus two small fish, given to and multiplied by the **One** Son of God Jesus, equals twelve baskets of leftovers ... not to mention the full feeding of a huge crowd! The key ingredient in that multiplication formula is the ONE Who is doing the multiplying. Give Jesus what you have and what you are and He can miraculously make much more out of it than you can imagine! Give what you have and who you are, in the words of Paul "... now to Him, Who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us."

As many of you know, there are only two of the many miracles of Jesus recorded by all four Gospel writers. The first is the miracle we commemorate and celebrate every Easter, and that is the miracle of the Resurrection. All four Gospels contain an account of that. I preach on that miracle at least once a year, so that means I've preached at least twenty-five sermons on that miracle from this pulpit. 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. For the record, I've preached on this five times, maybe six, in the past twenty-five years; so bear with me if you've heard some of this before! Again, 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! Various attempts over the years have been made to "de-mythologize" this account over the centuries ... such as some disciples, knowing a huge crowd was coming, secretly pre-stocked a large cave near this location and Jesus, standing strategically in front of the cave, made the food "appear" as friends handed it to Him from behind; or when this young boy shared his packed lunch of five small rolls and two fish, everyone else was inspired to share the food they had brought along, so this was a "miracle" of sharing.<sup>1</sup> However, a plain reading of the text infers the miraculous nature of this event.

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 spent. 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 (roughly comparable to a capacity crowd at Boston Garden). Their plans to be alone were put on hold. So, Mark tells us Jesus began teaching the crowd 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 replied, "You give them something to eat!" The Gospel of John adds the little detail that at this point, Jesus had specifically turned to the disciple Philip and said to him, perhaps with a bit of a twinkle in His eye, "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,

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<sup>1</sup> <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 5000 people (with 12 baskets of food left over), but rather, his teachings about loving one's neighbor prompts his followers to share food they have all already brought with them, and thus, all 5000 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?"

*"What do you mean, we?! Eight month's wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have even a small bite!" (The Greek text has "two hundred denarii"; a denarius is one day's wage.)*

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 their limitations. We all know people like that, don't we? 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, 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!"* 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 of five loaves and two fish 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 hundreds and fifties. *"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 to eat, 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, this multitude of need, and gives thanks to God for what He has. And notice, it is *then* the multiplication 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 to him, gives thanks to God for the resources He was given, 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. There are several lessons to be learned, but I simply choose this one to focus on today. 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.

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 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, whatever it is, threatens to overwhelm us, there are basically two options. Like Phillip, we can focus on what we don't have and whine about our limitations. 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 OR you can just run away. But the grim reality is that the crowd, whatever it is, will not go away, and running away is almost never a healthy option. Or, like Andrew, we can spend time 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 and with gratitude offer what they have, again the words of Paul, *"... now to Him, who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen"*