

Five Loaves and Two Fish

Matthew 14:13-21

“Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” James 1:22

William Barkley, renowned Scottish New Testament scholar and writer, is credited with saying this about discipleship:

“It is possible to be a follower of Jesus without being a disciple; to be a camp follower without being a soldier of the King, to be a hanger-on in some great work without pulling one’s weight. Once someone was talking to a great scholar about a younger man. He said, “So and so tells me that he was once one of your students.” The teacher answered devastatingly, “He may have attended my lectures, but he was not one of my students.” There is a world of difference between attending lectures and being a student. It is one of the supreme handicaps of the Church that in the Church there are so many followers of Jesus and so few real disciples.”

In today’s reading we encounter a large crowd of Jesus followers and 12 men who are real disciples. Let’s begin by looking at how we got here.

John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod Antipas to fulfill a frivolous promise to his stepdaughter, at her mother’s request. Now

Herod was hearing news of the growing following around Jesus and becoming more and more eager to remove him as well. Aware of the impending danger to his life and knowing his time had not yet come to give up his own life, Jesus removed to an area outside of Herod's reach by taking a boat across the Sea of Galilee to the place called Bethsaida. This was not enough to dissuade those seeking Jesus to turn away. Knowing where he would land on the opposite side of the lake, they travelled the edge of the lake and met Jesus upon his landing in that wide, open space.

Let's take a moment to consider these facts. Jesus had only recently learned of his cousin John's death and just as recently learned that Herod had plans to make him his next victim. Jesus needed a place of quiet rest, a place where he could grieve for his cousin, and think about his next steps. Instead, he is met by a very large crowd, looking to him for instruction and healing. Does he send them away? No. Having compassion on the gathered masses he sets about meeting their needs – teaching and healing. The disciples were witnesses to all of this.

The day grew late. In this wilderness there was no place to buy food, the people were most likely getting hungry, maybe even asking the disciples if they had anything to offer. Concerned about the late hour, the lack of food, and perhaps even Jesus' well-being, the disciples call him aside and suggest that he call it a day and send the folks home.

If any of us had been faced with a grueling day that landed on top of our own low reserves of energy, we likely would have agreed with the disciples. Not Jesus. Not only does he not agree to send the people away, he gives the task of feeding this large crowd to the disciples. Consider this, too, all four gospels record this miracle and each note there were 5,000 men. That does not include the women and children who were also likely present. With that in mind the crowd size immediately doubles. Can you hear the disciples starting to stutter, “B..b..but, Jesus, we only have five loaves and two fish!”?

As we know, Jesus was not deterred by this seeming limitation. Taking the meager offering, he held it up to God, in gratitude he asked God’s blessing, and then gave the food to the disciples to distribute. Jesus pronounced the blessing and the disciples were tasked with distributing that blessing. We are not told whether they did so eagerly or with some muttering under their breath, after all this was a huge crowd. What we do know is that they followed Jesus’ instructions, all were fed, and there were even 12 baskets of food left over. Nothing went to waste; the collected food could go home with the crowd or be used by Jesus and his companions.

What we are witness to in this story is the disciples doing the work that Jesus sets them to. Even though they were hesitant at first, they stepped up and did the work they were called to do. Even though they felt they were ill equipped, only five loaves and two fish, they set to the task of

feeding the crowd. Could they just as easily have said, “Jesus, there are too many people, too little food, and even if we can feed them all it will take forever. We’ll take a pass on this.”?

Now let me ask this, “How often are we the ones to say, “Jesus, I just don’t have the time, the talent, the money to do what you have asked me to do?” We look at the task we are feeling called to and only see limitations, not opportunities. We see scarcity, not God’s abundant ability to provide. We cannot see the generous nature of God being acted out through us. And we call ourselves disciples!

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a disciple is “one who accepts and assists in spreading the teachings of another.” It doesn’t say you have to be the brightest, the wealthiest, or the one with the most time to give. It simply says someone who helps to spread, in our case, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Please understand I’m not putting anyone down here. In fact, we stand in a long line of folks, called by God who responded less than enthusiastically.

We can start with Moses:

¹⁰ Moses said to the Lord, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.... Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else. Exodus 14:10, 13

Then there was Gideon:

“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” Judges 6:15

Who can forget Isaiah’s claim:

⁵ “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” Isaiah 6:5 Not your usual acceptance speech!

Jeremiah was no different:

⁶ “Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” Jeremiah 1:6

Despite their initial reluctance, each of these men became prophets, disciples, of the Lord God. Simon Peter, Andrew, James (son of Zebedee), John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddaeus (Judas son of James), Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot were all called by Jesus. Other than a Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew, we are not told how these other men responded to Jesus’ call to become one of his disciples. We do know that they all answered that call to serve.

We are called today to continue the work of Jesus as His disciples. We are to take our five loaves and two fish, thank God for his provision, and work with what we have. I can see this happening in our food pantry.

Over the past two years we have grown in what we are able to provide, as well in the number of volunteers and organizations who support the food pantry. I look forward to God using our five loaves and two fish to grow this congregation so that His Will continues to be done in Hatfield and surrounding communities. What will our 12 baskets look like in the months and years to come?

On that hillside so long ago, when a tired and grieving Jesus, blessed loaves and fishes, feeding a hungry crowd, the disciples learned that God would provide whatever they needed. That same God provides what is needed for today's disciples to go into the world to continue to share the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let that be an encouragement to us to, like Jesus, give thanks to God for what he has provided and seek its increase; to go out among the masses sharing what we have been given; and looking to see the overflow. As I said last Sunday, God's will shall prevail, especially when we accept and act out our roles as His disciples. May His blessing be upon us.

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