

John 6:1-14 ~ Ephesians 3:14-21

More Than Enough to Go On

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Introduction to Gospel Story

The story we are about to hear, the “Feeding of the Five Thousand” is not just *another* miracle story. It is the *only* miracle story included in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is actually told not once, but twice in Matthew and twice in Mark. This story was definitely trending there in the first century. I can’t even imagine how many YouTube hits it might get if this story happened last week. But let’s face it: this story has been around for over two thousand years. Most of us have heard it before. It may even seem like 5,000 times before. Spoiler alert: loaves and fish were multiplied.

So how can God feed us a *fresh* Word—how can Jesus satisfy the hunger, the emptiness, the lack we are experiencing right now? What does this story have to do with those gnawing anxieties weighing on our hearts this day? John’s telling of this core story feeds us and connects us to Jesus more directly, than the others.

On the one hand, it is remarkable how many of the story details line up exactly in all four gospels, especially around the numbers: the crowd of 5,000 people, the amount of food they had to start with: 5 loaves and 2 fish. The number that ate and were satisfied: 100%; And the amount of leftovers: 12 baskets of fragments. These statistics, if you will, are the same in all four gospels, including John. Being the outlier Gospel, written at least a quarter century later, these consistencies are surprising. This is a core story where the numbers, the disproportion, the shared group experience of being fed helped form the early Christian understanding of who this Jesus was.

As Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, author, and public theologian, points out in his recent book, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a Divided World*, “The kind of Jesus we believe in will determine the kind of Christianity we practice.”¹ This story directs to the heart of the Jesus of the Gospels, with John’s unique handprints: Setting the scene to echo the story of Moses and of the Exodus; And putting the distribution of the food directly into Jesus’ hands. Let us now be fed by the Word of God, and be satisfied.

Sermon

I thought my husband, Bob, was an avid baseball fan. He started following the Oakland A's back when we lived just about a couple miles away from the Oakland Athletics' home ballpark, the Coliseum in Oakland, California. We could sometimes hear the roar of the crowd from our back deck on a warm summer's night. We even took our newborn baby Emily to a game when she was all of 3 weeks old. Back in those California days, when Bob was a doctoral student taking classes and got bored with the lecture being given, he confesses now—that he would write out the A's roster, each name, position, batting average, from memory. To this day, his eyes dance with satisfaction at the turn of the double play from the 3rd baseman's throw to 1st and onto 2nd. And not much can surpass his satisfaction at a walk off home run that puts the game in the win column for his Oakland A's. Yes, Badgers--he is becoming a Brewer's fan, as well.

Well, I thought my husband, Bob, was an avid baseball fan until the last 6 weeks when our son-in-law Matt and daughter Emily and their baby Isabel came to live with us. This summer I have been witnessing Matt's Chicago Cubs fever. His encyclopedic knowledge of present and past cubs games and players is astonishing. When our Wi-Fi went out for a weekend, Matt whipped out his DVD set of the Cubs World Series and other cubs games—enough to fill the entire weekend. He's hoping to acquire a DVD set of the entire 2016 season of games. Matt has not one, but two Cubs fitted hats. And of course Isabel already has a Cubs bib. Thanks to Matt, my eyes have been opened to a whole new level of baseball fandom.

You may be wondering at this moment, what baseball has to do with the "Feeding of the Five Thousand?" No, there were no ballpark franks passed out that day, nor was there a seventh inning stretch. However there is something about the distribution of the food and the position of the crowds that we will get to in a moment. More centrally, baseball can teach us about the gift that Jesus wants to give all of us. The gift that Jesus gave to each person on the mountain there that day. The gift that Jesus has for you today. *The gift that is more than enough to go on.* Here's a story about that gift, told by Jim Wallis who coached his nine year Old's team. It's about a game where they were down 5 - 0, and they had already lost their opening couple of games. He writes,

"It didn't look good. But all of a sudden, our bats and our team came alive, and all the practice and preparation we had done suddenly showed itself. Best of all, our rally started in the bottom half of the order with our weakest hitters. Two kids got on with walks and our least experienced player came up to the plate. With international parents, Stefan had never played baseball before, and it was clear he didn't have a clue. But somehow he hit the ball and it went into the outfield. Our first two runs scored, and Stefan ended up on second base. Being from a polite British Commonwealth culture, he began to walk over to the shortstop and second basemen and shake their hands! "Stefan," I shouted, "you have to stay on the base!" "Oh," he said, "I've never been here before."

Inspired, other kids who had never gotten hits before either also got them now. Then the best hitters started to hit, and we came back to win 11-6. I gave Stefan the ball. In a long team meeting afterward, the kids couldn't stop telling each other what they had learned. "We didn't give up and came back!" "Our rally started with the bottom of the order." "Sometimes you get what you need from unexpected places."... Finally our star player said, "This just goes to show you, you can't ever give up on hope. We always have to keep hoping no matter what." Most important, we became a team on that day.ⁱⁱ

That's the gift: unexpected hope. Unexpected hope in our own lives. Unexpected hope coming from the bottom. Yes: from the bottom of the order. When we are at the bottom of our game: out of energy, out of time, out of options. This turn around hope can feed us when we are at the end of our rope – as an individual, as a community, as a world. And unexpected hope is what Christ calls us to offer the world. The world Christ came to heal and to save. Let's be honest: the vision of hope given to us in Christ Jesus is counter to most of the speech in this world. The world that tells us we never have enough. The world that tells us we always need more. But this is what Jesus pushes back against. This is what the Body of Christ looks like.

So how do we access this hope? How do we leverage the glory and disproportionate grace of Christ Jesus into our world of darkness, desperation and doubt? I find in John's telling especially, four things we can do, four spiritual practices taken directly from this story that can help us wherever we are, whatever emptiness may be draining us and dragging us down. Here they are:

- **First: Offer what you do have.** (However small or insufficient it may seem. Don't second guess it. Don't minimize it.) Give what you can, offer for the greater good for the community. There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people? (v. 9)
- **Next: Sit down.** Look at the story in the bulletin for a moment, if you have a pencil handy, you will find it three times repeated in v. 10, 11, 12 Did you notice that Jesus only gave bread to those who were seated? That's a big one, we often forget. And may be the hardest of all for some of us. It sounds simple, but it isn't'. However if you run it through your biblical echo chamber, your may hear the 23rd Psalm – The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me..."lie down in green pastures." Or in Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God." Ps. 46.10. Feeling out of hope? Needing Jesus to feed you some hope, a fresh helping of new perspective? Sit down.
- **Then: Give thanks.** V.11 That's what Jesus did in this story. That's what Jesus did at the Last Supper. That's what we can do. That's our reset button. Give thanks. Find the blessing even and especially when you are feeling empty and drained, or scared.
- **Finally: Let Jesus feed you.** V. 11. Can you imagine how long it took for Jesus to feed 5,000 people? Being fed by Jesus is not like picking up fast food in

your car at MacDonald's. It doesn't happen right away. And it may not be what you ordered. But it will fill you, it will satisfy you. Maybe not your craving, But Jesus will satisfy your longing.

Here they are again, the four spiritual practices found in this miracle, to help us access the miracle of unexpected hope: **Offer what you do have, Sit down, Give thanks, Let Jesus feed you.**

I have one more baseball fan to tell you about here in the bottom of the ninth inning of this sermon. She surpasses my husband Bob and even my son in law Matt, in her baseball longevity and loyalty. In fact she has been rooting for the home team since the 1920's. That would be my almost 95-year old mom. In the 60's when we lived in NJ, it was the New York Mets, in the 70's-80's, it was the Kansas City Royals, when we lived in Wichita and then Prairie Village, KS. Since the 90's when they moved to Philadelphia, it's been the Phillies, of course. Although she is as competitive as they come, she loves to root for the underdog. And nothing thrills her like a come from behind win. Mom has also taught Bob, who was the one who got us started on following the Oakland A's back in the 80's, about how to stay with a team during its lean seasons and years and years. "Get interested in the young players and their careers, their ups and downs. Watch for the new talent, the surprising turns."

Jesus is interested in every player, every inning. The Jesus in the Gospels, the Jesus I know, roots for the underdog, as does our God throughout the Bible. The Jesus I know chose to become the underdog in order to save us all. This Jesus we believe in, is for us, is with us, *especially* when we are at the bottom of our personal game, or when we as a community or nation are striking out at every turn.

This Jesus is inviting us to give whatever we can, and to trust Christ to turn what ever we have into not just enough, but *more than enough to go on*, for us and for everyone. Yes, that is the miracle that we are being called to practice, for Christ's sake: Let's play ball.

ⁱ Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a Divided World*, (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, MI, 2013), p.13.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.