

"You Give Them Something to Eat"

This is a popular story. It's one of the few miracles that are recorded in all four gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This was obviously seen as an important miracle to convey about Jesus. It's a common tendency in such cases to spend too much time in looking at what all four accounts say, trying to harmonize them into a single account, so that we can get the full picture of what went on in that miracle. Now, sure, that is helpful, and there is certainly a time and place to do that. But what's also important to do is to understand what each gospel account's unique contribution is, within its own book. So, in the case of Mark, I want us to look at this account, *according to Mark*. I want to see what Mark is emphasizing. I want to see the significance of this miracle in terms of the book of Mark. Yes, I'll mention a thing or two about how the other accounts describe this miracle. But what is Mark doing with this miracle? How is he working it into the bigger picture of this book? How is he using it to develop his own account of Jesus and Jesus' ministry?

Well, as we look at this account in Mark, we'll find that one thing in Mark's scope is the disciples. If nothing else, Mark is showing how Jesus is teaching the disciples something in this event. This miracle in Mark serves an important role in the disciple's own understanding of who Jesus is. Mark brings us into the journey of the disciples. He's helping us to see how they are, and they aren't, figuring out who Jesus is. You see, Mark will keep referring back to this miracle in the next few chapters. We'll see in next week's passage that the disciples have trouble understanding about Jesus walking on water. Mark will explain why in verse 52 by referring back to this miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. He says the disciples didn't understand this miracle about the loaves, because their hearts were hardened, and that's the same reason why they were so astonished about Jesus walking on water. In chapter 8, Jesus will do again another miraculous feeding, that time feeding four thousand people. Again, after that miraculous feeding the disciples will be on a boat with Jesus, and again they will be misunderstanding Jesus, and so Jesus will chide them. And when Jesus chides them after that second miraculous feedings, he rebukes them for not understanding the feeding of the five thousand and of the four thousand. All of this then culminates with the disciples finally starting to get it - After Jesus rebukes them for not understanding these two miracles, we then find him asking them in chapter 8, "Who do you say that I am?" And they respond with that momentous confession: "You are the Christ," Mark 8:29.

So that is the big picture. Jesus is using this miracle as part of a bigger lesson for the disciples. That's what Mark is showing us. And so as we dig into this passage, we'll see Mark beginning to paint this bigger picture. And let's keep this in mind over the next few weeks as we study the next couple chapters. Let's be on the lookout for how Mark describes for us the disciples' own spiritual journey. As so as we keep this in mind, we can watch part of the disciples' spiritual journey unfold before us.

But today we'll focus in on this feeding of the five thousand. And we'll try to look at it from this perspective of the disciples. What is Jesus doing with the disciples in this passage? Remember, these disciples are not just passively learning from Jesus. No, they had just got back from being sent out as apostles on Jesus' behalf. And so Jesus is shaping them and their future ministry in this passage. And so as we look at this miracle from the perspective of the disciples

today, I'd like us to consider our own role in ministry. How is God shaping us and our ministry through this passage?

So let's begin with verse 30. In verse 30, we find that the twelve disciples have returned from their mission. Remember, two weeks ago, we saw that Jesus sent the twelve out two by two. Here we see them referred to as apostles. Jesus had sent them out as his authorized representatives. They preached that people should repent. Surely they told people about Jesus and the coming of the kingdom. And along the way, they cast out demons and healed many people, because they had been endowed with authority from Jesus. And so now in verse 30 they return from their short term mission project. It says that they told Jesus all that they had done and taught. Think about that; they were probably really excited. Sure, the mission work was probably tough. They probably had to shake the dust off their feet a few times when people rejected their message. They probably had some cold and hungry nights when no one welcomed them with hospitality. But it seems that overall their mission was a success. As we saw last week, word had been getting out about Jesus; no doubt, in part because of their work. And so it seems that the disciples came back excited. All the groups of two return and they are probably telling Jesus and each other everything that happened. I'm sure it would have been pretty neat to have been there and hear about all their "war stories."

And so in verse 31 Jesus says that they need a break. Crowds of people were continuing to come and go, overwhelming the disciples. They weren't even able to find time to eat. So Jesus says that they needed some well deserved R&R. They needed to get away and recharge, so that they could all return to ministry. And so Jesus has them load up in a boat and head for a different place - a deserted place it says in verse 32, literally, the "wilderness".

And so Jesus and the disciples are on the boat, heading for a place where there should not be too many people. They are heading to a place where they can find some peace and quiet. But wait - verse 33. As they are sailing off on the lake, people see them leaving. And the people recognize "them," and start to follow after them on foot. Looking at the other gospel accounts, it looks like they were probably starting around the northwest corner of the lake and heading for the northeast corner, and so the people would have had to run north and then east to follow them. And the text emphasizes that they did this with such passion, that they were starting to gain on them, even though they were on foot! So much for their R&R. It looks like this retreat had turned out to be short lived like many of Jesus' own attempts in the past to get away.

And so even though the disciples themselves haven't had time to eat, we see that there is something that they had to do first. There is a flock that needs feeding! So, before they get any R&R, there was ministry to be done. And notice how Mark draws our attention to the disciples here. In verse 33, when the people start following after Jesus and the disciples, it's not because they recognized just Jesus, it's because they recognize "them." That's one important little pronoun - not "him" but "them." The emphasis here is on the group. Remember, it was the twelve disciples who had just been sent out on a mission. The crowds were coming and going here because of their work. Now as they try to get away, the people notice "them". That's a small but important way that Mark is telling us to keep our attention on the disciples and see how Jesus is teaching them amidst all this.

But of course it is Jesus in verse 34 who takes the lead in ministering to this large crowd. He starts to teach them because they are like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd. This is reminiscent of Numbers chapter 27 where Moses is about to die. The people of God are in the wilderness, about to

enter the Promised Land. There, Moses asks God to appoint someone as his successor to lead the people, lest they be as sheep without a shepherd. Of course, Ezekiel 34 picks up that language and prophesies that a son of David, the Messiah, would one day be that shepherd. Ezekiel 34:23, "And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd." That's what Jesus is doing here. He is that one shepherd, prophesied to come. He has come to feed this flock in a new wilderness, to lead them into a new, better, Promised Land.

And so Jesus, as this shepherd, begins to teach these people. Verse 34 says that he taught them many things. Jesus was indeed feeding this hungry flock, he was giving them a rich feeding of spiritual food. His "feeding" went so long that verse 35 tells us that it grew late in the day.

At that point, the disciples decide to speak up. They point out to Jesus that it was growing late and that they were in a remote place. Send the people away, they say, so that they can buy something to eat. The people need to eat Jesus. Of course, it makes you wonder if the disciple's weren't a little personally motivated here as well. Maybe they were thinking, "Remember Jesus, you said we needed to take a break too; we haven't eaten either."

Of course Jesus is not the one to get wrapped up in teaching and forget about people's physical needs. Maybe some of us pastors have that problem, but I don't think Jesus did. Remember, Jesus when he raised up Jairus daughter from the dead - when everyone is completely dumbfounded and rejoicing, Jesus interrupts and tells them to give the girl something to each. So Jesus is not oblivious about people's physical needs. He's well aware of them.

Instead, it seems that Jesus is using this as an opportunity to teach the disciples as well. As soon as the crowds arrived, Jesus had proceeded to feed them spiritually. Now, in light of their physical needs raised by the disciples, how does Jesus respond? He tells the disciples, not to send them away, but for them to feed them. He says to the disciples, "you feed them."

The disciples are a bit astonished by this request. How could they feed them? As we find out at the end of the passage, there were 5,000 men there. The gospel of Matthew tells us that there were also women and children there in addition. So there were a lot of people here to feed. The two hundred denarii worth of bread that they suggest would have represented almost a year's wages for the average worker. So, the disciple's suggestion to go buy that much food was probably asked a bit rhetorically; maybe even a bit rudely. Even that much food, however, would have only given a small amount for each person there.

Jesus simply responds, however, by having them take an inventory of what they had available. Five loaves and two fish. Jesus is preparing them to learn a lesson by having them count what they had. There should be no doubt to the disciples of this miracle that Jesus would do. So Jesus takes the bread and fish, gives thanks for them, breaks them, and gives them to the disciples to distribute. In doing this, Jesus has the disciples feed them. The disciples find the small amount of food, and the disciples distribute it.

And yet, Jesus is ultimately behind the feeding. He is the one who miraculously multiplies it. We're not told when or how it is multiplied. If it happened all at once, or as Jesus broke it, or what. But the results are obvious. Verse 42. Everyone ate and was satisfied. In other words, everyone was full. It's not like people saw the meager supplies and that many politely passed on the food or just took a small amount. No, everyone ate, and everyone ate until they were full. And

if that testimony was not clear enough, the disciples then go and pick up the remaining scraps: twelve baskets full. Not only is that an amazing amount remaining afterwards, surely more than what they started with, but notice the number of baskets: twelve. One for each of the disciples. One for each disciple, so they could each learn this lesson from Jesus. None of them could ignore it. They eat picked up a full basket's worth of leftovers!

Now if it's not clear already that Jesus is teaching his disciples through this miracle, then think about this: the crowds weren't even that aware of the details of this miracle. Mark's account about the miracle draws us into Jesus' inner circle. We see dialogue in this passage, and it is specifically between Jesus and the disciples. This dialogue brings us into this moment between them and Jesus. There's no reason the crowds would have even needed to know about this interchange. Think about it. Would Jesus or the disciples get up and make an announcement: "We'll folks, we know it's late and you are probably hungry, but all we have are these five loaves and two fish, so if everyone can sit down, we'll see how far they go." No, that's not likely what happened. The crowds are told to get into groups and that they would be fed, and they were fed. This miracle is not so much for the benefit of the masses as it is for the benefit of the disciples. And yet, even though they were made to count the inventory food and see that they only had this small amount of loaves and fish, and even though they picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers, at the end it seems that they still hadn't quite learned the lesson that they needed. The next couple chapters in Mark will show that to be the case.

And there are certainly a number of lessons that they could be learning here. In terms of ministry, they are learning that they have to be ready to serve at any moment. That might interrupt their plans for rest and recuperation. This ministry certainly involves being ready to teach spiritual truths at any moment. But they also learn here that they need to be ready to minister to people's physical needs as well. They need to be ready to feed people physically, even as they feed them spiritually, as an act of Christian compassion and hospitality. These were important ministry lessons for the disciples, and they are important ministry lessons for us as well!

And yet as important as these ministry lessons are, the most important lesson that Jesus was teaching them was about himself. This is the lesson that they seem to not have gotten yet. They hadn't fully figured out who Jesus is. Yes, they had been sent out already as his apostles, as his representatives, but they were still figuring him out nonetheless. Remember back to the incident where Jesus calmed the wind and sea. They were dumbfounded. The knew this suggested that Jesus was more than just human, but they still couldn't grasp the fact that he was the eternal Son of God who had come in the flesh.

And here they have another opportunity to learn about Jesus. This is a miracle that Jesus will appeal to in chapter 8, rebuking them for not understanding its significance. In other words, there is something about this miracle that the disciples missed. There is something that they didn't understand about this miracle, and it has to do with Jesus. It has to do with who Jesus is. Just think about the setting. They are in the wilderness. Jesus sees the people as a sheep without a shepherd, so he steps up and becomes that shepherd. He teaches the people. He gives them the word of God. And then he sees that the people are hungry. The disciples almost seem to be grumbling and complaining about not having any food. And so Jesus feeds them in a miraculous way.

I've already suggested how Jesus' actions here are a fulfillment of Moses' prayer in the wilderness for God to raise up a shepherd for God's people. I've already pointed to how Jesus fulfilled Ezekiel's prophecy of the one shepherd who was

coming from the house of David. But I hope you also are beginning to see how this feeding of the five thousand is reminiscent of the first exodus from Egypt where God's people were brought out of the land of slavery, into the wilderness, and ultimately into the Promised Land. And so what we have here is a picture of a New Exodus in Mark.

Remember, in the Old Testament, Israel was led out by Moses into the wilderness. There Moses proclaimed God's word to them. And there in that wilderness, the people grew hungry. They complained and grumbled against God that they did not have any food. And so what happened? God's sent manna from heaven to feed the people. In that wilderness, God provided for the physical needs of the people, through a miraculous feeding. And he did this through his servant Moses.

All this similarity between the Old Testament experience of Israel, and this event here in Mark, begs to see a sort of New Exodus theme. That's especially true when we remember that Jesus quotes Moses in the wilderness by describing the people as a sheep without a shepherd and then becoming that shepherd. In the account of this miracle in gospel of John, we're told that it was even during the time of the Passover, which certainly would have brought the Exodus to mind. And in that account in John, we see that the next day people come and find Jesus again, essentially looking for more food, and Jesus begins talking about the manna in the wilderness from the Old Testament. All of this confirms, that this feeding of the five thousand is begging us to think about the Exodus and to see this event as a picture of a sort of New Exodus.

But to be more pointed, I think it is especially calling us and the disciples to see Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ. As we've mentioned, Jesus is the shepherd requested by Moses and the shepherd prophesied by Ezekiel. Jesus is painted here as that shepherd, and so he is painted here as the Messiah. The disciples haven't fully grasped that yet, but they are starting to. That is the ultimate lesson that the disciples had to learn. They need their hearts to be softened and broken so that they could whole-heartedly believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ. That is the point that they will eventually come to in chapter 8, but Mark will show us how Jesus uses this miracle to help them get there.

And so let's think just a little bit further about this New Exodus theme, and what it suggests about who Jesus is. What was the significance of the Old Testament Exodus? It was physical freedom from slavery. The Israelites were enslaved under the Egyptians. Through the ten plagues and the Passover, God freed the people from this slavery. God then led them by Moses and by pillars of cloud and fire, eventually into the Promised Land. But to get to the Promised Land of Israel, they had to go first through the wilderness. Certainly the freedom in the wilderness was better than slavery in Egypt, though it was still not the Promised Land. There were trials and temptations to overcome in the wilderness. It was a difficult time. And it was a time of preparation for the people, where God taught them his laws and made a covenant with them. And so life in the wilderness for the Jews was an already, but not yet, sort of life. They were already redeemed from slavery, but not yet fully tasting of the full benefits of the Promised Land. Already they were enjoying God's provisions, but they had to trust in the final fulfillment of God's promises, to bring them into a land of milk and honey.

And so thinking about the first Exodus gives us some illumination on this New Exodus. Certainly, this feeding of the five thousand is only one place of many in the New Testament where Scripture suggests that Christians have tasted of a New Exodus. But this passage especially points to the arrival of a new better Moses-Jesus Christ. The promised shepherd had arrived. And as this passage suggests this New Exodus theme, it therefore suggests what this new shepherd would do. He

would ultimately feed us. And he would not only with physical food, but he would eventually feed us of himself - in the sense of the cross. On the cross he gave up his life for us. He did this so we can have a new exodus - an exodus out of slavery to sin, and into a new better promised land, the promised land of heavenly life with God for all eternity!

And yet right now we are in the wilderness. We are in the already / not yet. We who have come to Christ, have already been set free from our bondage to sin. We have already tasted of that new exodus. But we have not fully entered the final promised land. Our lives in this world are lives in the wilderness. And yet as much as Jesus and the disciples fed the five thousand here in the wilderness, both physically and spiritually, we can have great comfort knowing that God feeds us here and now. God takes care of us his people, as we live in this "wilderness" state of our Christian existence. The wilderness of life can be tough. Sometimes we just want to escape the wilderness. We can't wait for heaven. But he calls us to be in the wilderness for now. And yet the wilderness can also be a time of great things. It can be a time where we see God do wonderful things. And it can be a time where God grows us so much as well.

This wilderness existence which we have right now should influence how we act as Christians. We know that God will provide for us in this wilderness. But he gives that provision even through his church. Jesus fed the five thousand here, but he did it through his disciples. He told his disciples, "you feed them." And so the church as the next generation of the twelve disciples continues to be given that responsibility. As much as God is feeding his children both spiritually and physically as we exist in this wilderness state, we see that he is doing this through the church.

And so as the church, we need to realize that this is our responsibility. I think we usually put a lot of emphasis on the work of spiritual feeding that we do here. That's certainly the right emphasis. It was Jesus' emphasis as well. But Christ also calls us to be mindful of people's physical needs. That's why we have a diaconal ministry. Remember, it was the twelve apostles who formally established that in Acts chapter six. The apostles, in addition to their ministry of teaching and prayer, were also in charge of the diaconal work - for example, making sure the widows received daily food. But the apostles realized that there was so much diaconal work to be done, that they had the congregation nominate seven men for the apostles to put in charge of that task. The twelve had a concern to take care of people's physical needs. We see that again when the apostle Paul went to James, Peter, and John to get their blessing before going into ministry - the one special request that they made to Paul was to remember the poor.

What I'm trying to say is this: Jesus, as he feeds the five thousand, begins to call the disciples to realize their ministry role. He illustrates how to take care of God's people who are in this spiritual "wilderness" state. Chiefly, we are to be discipling people and training them in godliness. But we also are to be concerned with their physical needs as well. Yes, we know that Christ doesn't ordinarily multiply our food to feed thousands with just a few fish and loaves of bread. But he certainly does provide for us in so many ways. For some of us, this means that he gives us in abundance, so we have something to give to others. For some of us, we might need to be recipients of that diaconal aid and service. Whatever your situation, whether you are providing aid, receiving aid, or both, I want you to praise the Lord. Praise the Lord that it is he who has called his church to look even to the physical needs of his sheep. It is the Lord who is ultimately taking care of each of us.

And what an amazing shepherd we have. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the new, better, Moses. The shepherd of shepherds. The one who leads us out of sin, into a glorious life of righteousness. As we journey in this wilderness of life, may we keep our eyes and ears on our shepherd. He will not lead us astray. No, instead he will lead us into our heavenly eternal life. He will lead us into the greatest of rewards. What amazing grace. How great a shepherd. Lead on, oh Lord! Amen.

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