
You Give Them Something To Eat

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler

Atlanta, Georgia

Proper 11

Mark 6:30-44

Wouldn't it be great to have been one of the five thousand? One of the five thousand whom Jesus fed in the countryside? One of those he fed with five barley loaves of bread and two fishes? Can you imagine being outside, in the beautiful hills off the coast of the Sea of Galilee, when all was pleasant in those days? Can you imagine being out there one day to hear the great rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, as he taught?

The five thousand did not need to care about anything, did they? Why, it looks like they did not even care about what they were going to eat!

One of the disciples came up to Jesus that day, and he asked, "Where are we to get enough bread for all these people to eat?"

And do you know what Jesus said to his disciple? Do you know what Jesus said to the man who had given up so much in order to follow Jesus? Jesus said, "You, you give them something to eat."

Wouldn't it have been great to have been one of the five thousand? One of the five thousand whom Jesus fed in the countryside? The five thousand did not need to care about anything, did they? Why it looks as if they did not even care about what they were going to eat!

I think it's relaxing -like a vacation-- to be one of the five thousand. Just another person in the great horde, the great crowd, with no need to take responsibility, no need to speak up, no need to exert oneself. After all, it looks as if Jesus will take care of your every need when you're one of the five thousand. Do you need something to eat? Presto! Jesus will take five loaves of bread and two fishes and feed the multitude!

Do you need to be healed? Presto! Just pray to Jesus, and you'll get what you want! Do you need a new job? Do you need a wife or husband? Do you need for your children to straighten out? Do you need for your parents to be comforted? Do you need better conditions at work?

Do you need to be fed when you're hungry? Are you hungry and need to be fed? When you're one of the five thousand, you're in luck. When you're one of the sheep without a shepherd, you're in luck! Jesus has compassion on you. Jesus feeds you. Praise God! That is surely a good thing.

But what if you're not one of the five thousand?

This very familiar story of Jesus feeding the five thousand has another element that we sometimes miss. Yes, we know that five thousand were fed. But there are three sorts of characters in this miracle story. There's Jesus, there are the five thousand, and then there is another sort of character. There's Jesus, there's the five thousand, and then there are the disciples.

Put yourself in the role of the disciples for a moment. Yes, it would have been great to have been one of the five thousand. But what if you were one of the twelve?

What if you were one of the disciples of Jesus? What if you had given up much to follow Jesus? What if you had committed your life to following Jesus, to listening to him, and to serving him wherever he went? What if you were not one of the five thousand, but were one of the disciples?

What if you came up to Jesus and asked, "Where are we going to get these people something to eat?" Do you know what Jesus said to that group? Jesus said, "You, you give them something to eat?"

Me? Me give them something to eat? I thought Jesus was the great miracle worker? I thought Jesus could fix anything, could heal anything, could solve anything, could change any circumstance. Let's just turn it over to Jesus. Is there anything we need? Let's just turn it over to Jesus.

Well, there's some truth to that attitude, of course. But Jesus's first response to the disciples surely must have stunned them. "You give them something to eat." Jesus turns to his disciples, to the people who have truly shown their commitment and love to him, to his followers, and Jesus says, "You give them something to eat."

That does not help the situation at all! Why won't Jesus act immediately? Why won't Jesus do what I, a disciple, ask? Why does Jesus turn the question over to me, turn the need over to me?

Is that what disciples are supposed to do? Listen to Jesus ask us to do his work for him?

Well, yes. Yes, it is what disciples are supposed to do. Disciples are supposed to be different from the five thousand. Disciples are supposed to be different from just people in need all the time. Oh, yes, the disciples were certainly in need. All of us are in some need or another. But the disciples are supposed to be the ones who care for those needs, who care for others.

When you hear this story of the feeding of the five thousand, do you imagine that you are one of the five thousand, or one of the twelve? At some point, each of us is one of the five thousand. I know that. But at some point, Jesus also wants us to be one of the twelve. At some point, each of us is supposed to be one of the twelve, one of the very people whom Jesus asks to do his work for him.

What kind of follower of Jesus are you? Are you one of the five thousand carefree and nonchalant followers who are like sheep without a shepherd, who gather together with nothing to eat, always waiting for some miracle?

Or are you one of the twelve? Are you a disciple of Jesus? Are you a disciple of Jesus?

If you are a disciple of Jesus, you will hear this response of Jesus. When you are asking God to feed the hungry in the world, when you are asking God to heal your family, when you are asking God to comfort the sorrowful, when you are asking God to intercede in the world, you will hear the same response that Jesus gave his disciples two thousand years ago.

You, You give them something to eat.

Me? Me give them something to eat?

Yes, you. Us. There are no other arms and legs of Jesus. It is only us, those of us who really do want to follow Jesus. Do you want to follow Jesus? Do you want to be Jesus' disciple?

It's hard work. It's not just sitting on the hillside and waiting for someone else to come up with five loaves of bread. It's not just taking every request up the chain of command and waiting for someone else to do something. It's up to us.

There is no one else to do it.

Wouldn't it be great to be one of the twelve disciples? If we were disciples of Jesus, we would hear that command, "You give them something to eat," and we would immediately begin looking for that something.

It probably would not be something big that we find. It may not be a supermarket just over the next hill. It might be just a little child. We go out looking and working and seeking, and all we find -usually-- is very small indeed.

But we do not despair with that small amount. A disciple does not despair. A disciple gives even that, even that small gift, to Jesus. What we seek, we find, and we offer it to this Jesus. We offer it to this same Jesus who said, "you, you give them something to eat."

Jesus takes our meager offering. Only then does Jesus actually do something in this great miracle story. Jesus does nothing until the disciples, the disciples!, do the seeking and finding and offering. He takes that bread and fish, and he makes them enough. He performs a miracle, when the disciples have taken a step of faith.

Would you rather be one of the five thousand, or one of the disciples? It's hard work being a disciple. But when you're a disciple, you get to produce the miracle.

You, you give them something to eat.

AMEN.

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