

How Can We' Rather Than 'Why Should We

Maple Grove UMC

September 19, 2021

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Good morning.

I'd like to talk about the scripture reading today from Mark 6:30-44 or Jesus' feeding of the 5,000. There are many stories of Jesus doing miraculous things that seem impossible to us now, raising the dead, walking on water, changing water into wine, etc. and we could certainly look at this story as another example of just that. There's certainly nothing wrong with that interpretation but when asked to preach I specifically chose the version found in Mark because there's a certain theme to that Gospel that I think can help us with interpreting what we can take away from this passage. This story does appear in all 3 of the synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, but Mark is considered the oldest of the 3 and the versions in Matthew and Luke were likely copied and edited out of the account that was first shared in Mark. You see, each Gospel writer had their own idea of the nature of Jesus and what message about him they wanted to communicate out. For Mark there's a frequent theme that the Disciples and people around Jesus just don't quite get it. He keeps trying to tell them what they

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should do and the meaning behind things and they keep failing to carry out his wishes or doubting his explanations. In fact, many scholars believe the Gospel originally ended when Jesus appears to the women at the tomb in verse 16:8, “so they went out and fled from the tomb, for the terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The End. The women don't tell anyone that Jesus is raised, Jesus doesn't appear to anyone else, the mission is left incomplete. It's believed that once the Gospels of Matthew and Luke became more widely known and there were efforts to combine them all into a common book was when the rest of the ending was tacked on. The original version would certainly make for quite an abrupt ending, so I think it is worth asking what the implications are of ending the story that way. I think when looking at the broader theme of the Disciples not quite getting it, and the abrupt ending, the implication is that YOU the reader are supposed to be the ones the “get it”. We all are the ones being called to carry out Jesus' mission. To pick up where that incomplete ending left off.

So, what does this mean for how we make sense of this story? For me, I turn to the part where the Disciples tell Jesus to send the people away so they can get something to eat and Jesus said, “YOU feed them.” He doesn't say “I will feed them” He says, “YOU feed them.” But of course, the Disciples don't get it and it

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falls to Jesus to bless the meal and give away what he has. In light of the broader theme of the Gospel, that initial “YOU feed them” though is kind of a command for us. We’re the ones who are supposed to pick up where the Disciples of the story fall short. So, what do we do in that situation? We aren’t Jesus. We can’t create something from nothing. How do we feed multitudes like Jesus did when as individuals we don’t have enough for everyone?...

Not to get too sidetracked but if you’ll indulge a bit of a tangent, I’d like to say that I’m really not much of an actor. Sorry Maple Grove Players, I know you’re always looking for new talent but that probably isn’t me. However, when I was a child, I did rack up a few acting credits. I was one of the 3 wise men at the church Christmas pageant. I think I played some background scenery in my first-grade play called “The Last Litterbug”. Probably the funniest performance was when I was supposed to be a bunny in the background of one play and I decided to wear the wolfman costume my mother had made for me the previous Halloween but replacing the wolf mask for bunny ears. I was definitely the furriest bunny on that stage, but my greatest role, in that I actually had a couple lines, was as one of the soldiers in the story of Stone Soup.

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Maybe some of you are familiar with the story Stone Soup. It's been a while for me but for those that aren't, the story is about 3 soldiers returning from war who have nothing to eat and are hungry and enter a town and start asking people if anyone can spare some food. At each house they come to the people turn them away. Why should we give what little we have when we can barely feed ourselves, they think? Eventually the soldiers get an idea and they set up a big pot in the town square and fill it with water and start boiling it. They then throw in a few stones. The townspeople see them do this and start to gather around and ask what they're doing. Well, they say, in the army we got used to foraging for food and making do with what little is available so we're making stone soup. It's really good and we'd be happy to share it with all of you. That's great, the people say, but is it really any good? Oh yeah! Although, it would be a little better if we just had some carrots. Oh well. Hey! I have some carrots says one of the towns people, and they go and get their carrots and chop them up and add them to the soup. Oh, this is great. Too bad we don't have onions though. That would really make it good. Sure enough, another one of the townspeople says they have onions and adds them to the pot. This continues on and on until nearly everyone in the town has added something more to the soup. In the end they all have a great big feast together that feeds all of them, including the soldiers, and offers

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better nutrition from their combined ingredients than any one of them would have had with the lone ingredient they possessed. You see, the people of the town were afraid of scarcity and so they all hoarded what they had for fear of not having enough for everyone and being left without enough for themselves if they gave away any what they had. In the end though, there was enough for everyone. There was more than enough because they were able to feed the soldiers too. If they had asked themselves, how can I best help people during these times of scarcity rather than why should I help them, they would have all feasted together much sooner and been able to provide for others as well.

So, let's go back to the feeding of the 5,000. Perhaps Jesus created food from thin air, and it was enough to feed everyone. I've seen it portrayed as Jesus holding up his basket to the air and bringing it down suddenly filled. That isn't exactly what the scripture says he did. It says he looked up to heaven, blessed the meal broke the bread, but that is certainly a valid understanding of this scripture. God provides for us just as God provided for that crowd through Jesus. But again, I'm brought back to the fact that Jesus initially told the disciples, "YOU feed them" and the theme of Mark is often that we the reader are supposed to pick up where the disciples fall short, so perhaps there is another understanding that speaks to

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our own behavior. Perhaps Jesus is displaying more of an example to follow rather than another miracle to be in awe of.

Jesus and the disciples did not have enough food for everyone, but he gave all that he had. Perhaps there were others in that crowd that had some food with them too. After all, travel took a long time in those days. It wouldn't be unreasonable to bring a little something with you if you're out of the house. Surely most people wouldn't have had a lot of food with them but perhaps something at least. I don't know what kind of packer you are when you travel but I know I tend to throw a whole bunch of stuff in a suitcase and end up with more than I need. Others maybe pack more lightly and trust that if they forgot something they can pick up a replacement along the way. That was probably true with the people of that crowd. Some headed out to follow Jesus with extra food because they weren't sure when they'd get back. Others maybe only brought a little, and still others might have brought nothing. Seeing such a large crowd, most people probably would have been hesitant to offer up what they had because surely no one person brought enough for everyone and if they offered up what they had they'd end up with nothing for themselves. After all, it would barely make a difference in feeding everyone else anyway. Why should they take that chance? Well, Jesus did. He didn't have enough, and he gave it all. Others

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seeing that example perhaps decided to share what little they had, and then more shared what they had. Soon they ended up with a classic potluck situation where everyone gets fed and there are more leftovers than you know what to do with. An experience I'm sure we've all had at church potlucks, and I hope we can get back to more often again. But the point is, when everyone chipped in and thought about how they can help rather than why should they help, there turned out to be more than anyone ever expected.

So what does this mean of us, for our community, for society as a whole? I am a believer that the primary message of the Bible is not about waiting for God to magically change the world and all we have to do is stand by and believe. I believe the primary message of the Bible is that we are called upon to create the kingdom of God here on Earth. The responsibility is on us to do "On Earth as it is in heaven." So, when we look to the message of the Gospels, we look to find the plan Jesus lays out for how we can better create that kingdom on Earth. I remember theologian John Dominick Crossen once said, "Heaven's in great shape. It's this world that needs fixing." But is the problem that there isn't enough or that it's just not getting to the people who need it? An interesting fact of nature is that a population cannot increase without there being enough food for the existing population. It's physically impossible. Our bodies must be made of

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something for there to be more of us and so it's made from the food we eat. That means for every year that human population increased on this earth there wasn't just enough food for everyone, but more than enough. Enough to sustain the even larger population to allow it to continue to grow. So why are there people who go hungry? Not just throughout the world but here in our community. The problem isn't a lack of resources. It's a lack of equitable distribution of those resources.

Now I don't claim that these problems have easy solutions. I called this sermon "How can we rather than why should we?" because asking ourselves "how can we help" is a legitimate question without an easy answer. This is a question all churches and this very congregation often struggles with. For example, we have a covered porch with benches and a blessing box as a constant source of some food and other necessities. It is not at all uncommon for the occasional homeless person to choose our porch as a place to rest. Having such facilities is practically a magnet to bring in people who have nowhere else to go, but this church has also come a long way in embracing the opportunities the Holy Spirit puts before us even though we may struggle with how best to meet those opportunities. I was in a committee meeting not too long ago and we were talking about some of our early experiences with this church when we first joined. One

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person who had been here longer than I mentioned how when they first joined there was talk about how to get rid of some homeless people that had been hanging around. There was very much a mentality of “why should we help” rather than asking “how can we help?” If this congregation was the same now as it was then the answer would be to get rid of the blessing box, change the benches to those kinds that don't offer enough room to lay down like I've seen so many cities using as a draconian method for further displacing the homeless. Doing whatever we could to make the church less hospitable to anyone who would come here for shelter. In more recent times though, a ministry group has been gathering to figure out how we can use the opportunity to help the homeless rather than try to get rid of them. It's an ongoing process and COVID certainly makes it more difficult to do any number of ministries, but I am certain that far more good will be accomplished from that “how can we help” approach rather than the “why should we help” approach.

What about society as a whole? I mean when you think about it, if we're supposed to be creating the Kingdom of God on Earth than that goes beyond what we do as individuals. We have to actually change what we prioritize as a society. Now of course there is the classic argument, teach a man to fish rather than give him a fish, but honestly how often is the argument genuinely used to

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propose a better way to do something rather than just thrown out there to justify not doing something? We live in fear of the scarcity of resources in this world, but they aren't as scarce as we often act like they are. Instead, we hoard what we have and at best perform little acts of charity to assuage our guilt rather than truly changing the circumstances that create the imbalance. Like I pointed out before, there is and continues to be more than enough or else there wouldn't continue to be more people. These are difficult problems. Finding solutions that work logistically, fairly, and sustainably are complicated. It is not my intention to seem like I'm promoting any particular policy choices or a specific approach. However, what I do think is that if as a society we approached the problems of the world with a more of a mindset of "how can we help" we would find more solutions than avoiding the problems with a mindset of "why should we help." In some ways, the easiest thing we can do in so far as it requires the least individual effort, is to use our voices and influence to at least push our society to lean more toward that "how can we help" mentality. With enough of us pushing in that direction it could make a difference in addressing some of those global and national problems that can often seem so far outside our individual capacity to solve. Remember the people in the crowd with Jesus and the townspeople in stone soup knew they didn't individually have enough to solve the problem. It

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took all of them collectively to solve the problem and to do that it took having faith that their limited individual contribution would still be enough as part of the greater whole. We as Christians must have faith that God did provide everything we would need, assuming we didn't hoard it and create an imbalance of distribution. I'm reminded of Matthew 6:26, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" What we need has been provided as matter of our very existence and we've proven that by continuing to multiply on this Earth. We may not be able to multiply as we have been indefinitely but so far we've managed to have enough and so we know we have enough at least for right now and yet people still starve, people are still not provided for.

Let us look to Jesus not simply as a miracle worker in the sense of bending the laws of physics to create something from nothing. Let us look to him as an example to follow. Doing things that actually are within our power to do. "YOU feed them," he said. That means YOU here now, and me, and all of us. It won't be easy. Our world is complicated, and it can be hard to know what the best solutions are. What's important though, is that we have faith the solutions are possible, that the resources do exist, and that we approach all these problems with a mentality of "how can I" rather than "why should I." The first step is always

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making the effort rather than making excuses. The church is a great place to start because we're already part of a community that's making the effort but let it just be the beginning rather than the end of those efforts. Let us do on Earth as it is in heaven. Let us ask of ourselves, "How can I best feed them."

Let us go to God in prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for all you have provided. We know that this earth was made with all that all of us could need. We ask your forgiveness for not always letting everyone have access to what they need. We ask for strength to overcome our fears that cause us to hesitate to provide, that cause us to hoard what we have, that cause us to fall short of building your kingdom. We know that through you all things are possible and that all our problems do have solutions. We seek your guidance in finding those solutions and walking with you. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.