

Psalm 103:1-4  
Mark 6:30-44

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## “YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT”

But [Jesus] answered them, “You give the something to eat.” *Mark 6:37a*

Jesus' feeding of the multitude appears no less than six times among the four gospels. Jesus had sought retreat for his disciples and himself in a secluded place, but faced with the multitude's hungering and thirsting for the things of God, he welcomes, teaches and feeds them. His compassion bears all the marks of kingdom of God fellowship at its deepest and most courageous. Imagine raw modern day disciples, newly confirmed disciples, just like you (that's essentially what they were), pulling off a miracle like this in a Philadelphia baseball stadium this coming summer, for local hurricane refugees. I emphasize courageous disciples, because this is no solo virtuoso performance on Jesus' part. In every account, having broken the bread Jesus “gave it to the disciples to set before the people.” Without their agency, their partnership, there is no sign. “You,” he said, “You give them something to eat.” It is the incarnate way of his church, the way we make Jesus known.

For two years when I was in college I was Student Pastor of a tiny congregation in the unrelenting flatlands of eastern North Carolina. Frank Price Presbyterian Chapel, a ward of First Church, Wilson, was founded by a Presbyterian missionary on furlough who met a young deaf-mute named Alfred Sasser on the train. The missionary discovered that Alfred's little community of Black Creek had no Presbyterian church. It had a Baptist church, as one might expect in a state known to have more Baptists than people, but that likely fueled the zeal of missionary Price, who detoured to visit Alfred's family, and within two weeks had a congregation meeting in a barn. Some time later, on an acre of loam white soil in the midst of the corn fields, the white framed chapel was born.

Three decades later, and seven months into my solo student pastorate, Alfred Sasser died of cancer. He was just forty-two. I was thirty. I had never been to a funeral let alone performed or even assisted in one, and I was traumatized at the prospect. Then in an exhilarating moment of reprieve I realized that I would not

have to I perform it: I hadn't been to seminary; I wasn't even ordained! So I called the Rev. Larry Avent at First Church to hand over the mantle of responsibility. "Oh, that's not a problem," he said cheerily, "you don't have to be ordained to conduct a funeral or a graveside. Let me know if I can help with resources." When he put the phone down I found myself in a dark and scary place. He had said, in effect "This is your calling. You know the message of hope in Christ Jesus. You give them that hope, 'You give them something to eat.'"

Through college and seminary, and especially in my early years in ministry, it took me a long time to discover that this faith journey is not chiefly about harvesting more information, developing good preaching technique and pastoral care skills. It's about facing the hard questions, the Job questions like suffering and loss, and why evil exists—would evil exist if there were no people? This faith journey is about how to communicate the beyond that is in our midst, the unseen and unseeable, the abiding spirit of Jesus in the here and now. It's ultimately about claiming faith in God over reason, about not ever dismissing what doesn't make sense to me yet, because faith is the only meaningful response to mystery and grace. Reason is important, don't get me wrong, but it's always temporary, provisional—like the statements of science which are always subject to amendment century by century. Science, which I deeply admire and respect (you only have to look at my home library), cannot begin to match revealed truth such as happens in the moments of brilliant spiritual insight when we say "Aaaaahhh-*I see!*" We call that revelation. How else does one explain how goodness grows out of tragedy, how we are struck dumb by the sight of the sun speared river at the edge of day. How goodness nourishes when you give it away, like bread. How God's love can be like an all embracing canopy over humankind, where ours, at best, is so relentlessly selective. Faith, not reason, embraces such things. And in this my ancient countryman St. Anselm, who avowed "faith in search of understanding," became my good friend and guide.

Did you notice in our text from Mark (the same is true in all gospel accounts of this miraculous feeding) that nowhere are we told what Jesus taught or "preached" on that occasion. We are only told what he did and asked his followers to do. After Princeton Seminary I discovered that our people tend to forget most every word we pastors preach—they may recall an illustration or a story, usually absent its context!—but they will remember whether we were there for them when they needed us, like the multitudes who clamored for Jesus. He taught them all the day long, it seems, but the only thing we learn that they asked him for *was bread*. So, when our people ask in tribulation for the bread of God, for hope and assurance that God has not forsaken them in the aftermath of violence, or abuse, or imploded dreams, or the loss of a loved one—a child, a spouse, or a friend untimely taken—and you give them something of Christ to sustain them, they will not distinguish

between you and him. In such moments ministry becomes a sacrament, the real presence. I'm not talking about my ministry, but yours, especially you confirmands. Ministry is not the work of pastors—it's *your* work. "You give them something to eat." Pastors are merely prompters, like that off-stage presence in the school play who reminds you what to do or say when you get lost or confused.

Jesus' disciples were, in a real sense, so green, so young in faith, so new at working through this new faith journey and its responsibilities, that they were like you confirmands. They responded to the simplest imaginable yet most profound of "calls." As a fourteen year old confirmand once reminded me when I asked, "What does Jesus require of us?" He said, "Didn't Jesus just say 'Follow me'?" He has now said it to you—two words. And here you are. This is not something to take lightly—no matter how you think you arrived at this moment. The twelve disciples came, just like you, some confused, some passionately committed, some seeking, groping for answers, some skeptical, but all of them, as all of you, like the timid lion in the Wizard of Oz, discovering what we seek not in the final audience with the great wizard, but in the journey itself. The answer is the journey.

You are here in this extraordinarily privileged moment and place. And with privilege comes high expectation. You have answered our Lord Jesus thus far, who said "Follow me." And with privilege comes high expectation. You are the generation upon which, with God's magnanimous aid, a still to be re-formed church depends. We who have gone before you pledge ourselves to you, as to Christ. For all our zeal for the social and moral revolution of the sixties, we have moved too haltingly against the issues of the day. But you are the new disciples, infinitely more prepared, in many respects, than the apostles ever were.

This is your hour. Multitudes are like sheep without a shepherd outside the gate. The bread of God is given into your hands for a hungry and a hurting world. "You give them something to eat."

Amen