

“Christ Gives to and through His Church” Matthew 14:13–21 Pentecost 9A 8-6-17

It used to be a familiar sight, and still is in some church families during worship. The mom or dad sits next to the children, and it's time for the offering plate to be passed down each row. Children like to participate in what's going on, but what do they have to offer? Either before the service, or just as the plate arrives, parents who are teaching their children about giving, may place some small amount of money in their hand, and tell them to put it in the plate.

If that was your experience as a child, let me ask you, “Whose money did you put in the offering plate?” Was it yours, or your parents' money? Was it both? Did they not put into your hand? At that moment, it was *yours*. Though what you put into the plate was your money, it was 100% supplied by your parents. It was essentially a pass through.

Everything God supplies is a pass through, but as we get older, we begin to let some degree of greed or fear cause us to cling to more of what God supplies. If you're a parent telling your children to give 100% of what you put into their hand, you don't give them a choice. God does not tell *His* children, “give it all” even though it all comes from Him. Yet even the much smaller % can challenge our faith.

The amount or percentage is not really the main point, but rather the formation of faith that we are able to give because God first gives to us. As we shall sing later, “*We give thee but thine own, whatever the gift may be, All that we give is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee.*”

This brings us to Jesus feeding the 5000 in the wilderness. This familiar story is recorded by all four of the Gospel writers. That indicates its importance to teaching us about faith, and about what we do with what he puts into our hands.

Jesus had just received the sad news that John the Baptist has been murdered as a result of King Herod's vanity and lust and his queen's desire to silence John's warnings. He had gone to a secluded place to pray. That is a good practice in times of stress and sadness. Not that you isolate yourself from other people, but that you have some alone time with God in prayer.

But His popularity was such that He couldn't get much time alone. People were hungry for His teaching and healing. He spoke so differently from their rabbis that they marveled as his authoritative

wisdom. However, it was getting late and they were about to hunger for some real food for their bellies.

The disciples saw the problem coming. In this secluded place (if it were in Texas, the back 40 of someone's acreage) there were no restaurants. If these people were to eat, they would have to make the long walk to town to buy food. However, their answer to the problem of the people's hunger was to say to Jesus, “Send them away.”

Now we have no reason to doubt their compassion. After all, what options were there? However, it seems insulting to think they had to tell Jesus that there was going to be a problem with food supply. They presumed to identify and solve a problem of which they thought he was unaware.

Besides insulting Jesus', their answer was one too commonly repeated when we encounter need. “Lord, send them away”. In the Good Samaritan parable, the two religious men who passed by the robbery victim on the other side of the road sent themselves away. When little children came to Jesus, the disciples told Jesus to send them away. Children's ministry was out of their comfort zone. When the blind man Bartimaeus called out for Jesus to heal him, they told him to be quiet. Were they protecting Jesus? Did they underestimate his power and compassion? Or did they just not want to be bothered themselves? Perhaps all of the above.

So, it was quite a wrenching of their standard operating procedure to hear Jesus say, “NO. I won't send them away. They aren't going anywhere. *You're* going to feed them.”

Jesus challenged them on two different levels. First, they had to be involved in the actual care of others. They couldn't just be followers of Jesus, but also were to be active in his ministry. They had to be not just hearers of the word, but also doers.

Secondly, they had to *lead* and *do* with empty hands. In other words, they had to rely totally on Jesus in a way that mattered and tested their faith. It's easy to confess faith in Christ when faith isn't tested in the nitty gritty messiness of human need. If faith is just for the hereafter, then it cannot be tested in a way that shows it was vindicated. People don't come back from the grave to report on heaven's reality.

But they do testify to the faithfulness, love, and power of God when they receive food and shelter in miraculous ways. It matters when people can see that what you believed in was real. God's people are not only the recipients of those miracles but also participants in it. Our faith is real when we walk in

the confidence that whatever God calls us to do in service to others, he will truly supply the resource.

Paul put it this way in a passage commonly heard in stewardship messages: .

⁸*And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ...* ¹⁰*He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. (2 Cor. 9)* Paul wrote this by the same Spirit of Jesus that told the disciples, “You give them something to eat!”

After Jesus said that He looked up to heaven, from where all blessings come, gave thanks for the two fish and five loaves, and started putting the pieces into the hands of the disciples.

It may be interesting to speculate when the multiplication actually occurred: When Jesus handed the food over the disciples, or when they gave it to the crowd, or when the people ate it, only to discover more in their hand. It really does not matter when the miracle happened. It matters that it began with God and it did not end until all who ate were full.

Now it would not be entirely wrong to say this was just about feeding the stomachs of thousands of hungry people. But it's doubtful that all four Gospels would include this account unless there were more to it. In fact, there is much more. John refers to miracles as signs, because they are always pointing to something above them.

The higher meaning Jesus is pointing to is Himself, the arrival of God's Kingdom. After this miracle in John's Gospel, Jesus tells them that He is the bread from heaven that gives true life. All who eat of it will never be hungry. He reminded his hearers of the manna that fell on the Israelites in the desert, providing enough for them to be fully satisfied.

Jesus is not literal bread, of course. He *is* what bread provides for the body: Life. Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread to satisfy his physical hunger after a long fast. Jesus answered by quoting Moses, “*Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” Jesus, the Word that came down from heaven, which Isaiah 55 speaks about, is the source of life.

Food for the stomach avails nothing after the body dies, but the word of God gives life forever. Jesus is that Word because he became the atoning

sacrifice for our sins, which keep us from eternal life.

He put that life into our heart just as our parents put an offering in our little hands. He calls His Church to put that life into the hearts of others by sharing in every way the message of Jesus' salvation.

That message, given to us by God, we give to others by teaching His Word. And His Word will fill those who hear it and believe it. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”

We share that Word not only in written form, but also by faith active in love. The forgiveness that God pours out into our hearts we pour out into the hearts of others. The comfort we receive from Jesus is that by which comfort others in their distress. John put it plainly when he wrote, “We love, because He first loved us.” We give that love back as an offering of thanksgiving to God when we give it to our neighbor in need.

We are always to pray for others. But at the same time, God also uses us as active agents in his answer to those prayers. When we see a need, we don't say, “Lord, send them away”, but rather we hear Him say, “I didn't send you away, but I gave you love. Now, go and love the loveless, feed the hungry, comfort the sick and lonely. Give, as I have given you.” Amen.