

Sermon Title: Give Them Something to Eat  
 Primary Text(s): Matthew 14:13-23a, Feeding of the 5000  
 Other Texts: Matthew 28:16-20, The Great Commission  
 By: Rev. Terry Carty  
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 Season: Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Main Point: The feeding of the 5000 is a foreshadowing of what the risen Christ would commission the disciples to do with their lives. This still holds true for those who become disciples of Christ.

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 Matthew 14:13-23a (CEB)

Feeding the five thousand

<sup>13</sup> When Jesus heard about John (*that John had been executed*), he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. <sup>14</sup> When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. <sup>15</sup> That evening his disciples came and said to him, "This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

<sup>16</sup> But Jesus said to them, "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat."

<sup>17</sup> They replied, "We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish."

<sup>18</sup> He said, "Bring them here to me." <sup>19</sup> He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>20</sup> Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. <sup>21</sup> About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.

Walking on the water

<sup>22</sup> Right then, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup> When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray.

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 Whenever I hear this story of the feeding of the 5000, especially when it is read from the gospel of Matthew, I remember a time in the mid-1980's when I went on my first international mission trip to the country of Panama. My team went to begin construction on a Methodist center that would serve as a regional training and worship facility.

Earlier teams from Tennessee had gone to the region for several years to help an isolated little Methodist community of Bongo. They had rebuilt their church that had been devastated by termites and had built a parsonage for the pastor there. The teams always included physicians, nurses, and dentists who saw patients in this out of the way place far from government health care. So Tennessee teams had built a medical center in hopes that the government would occasionally send a public nurse to see patients there.

One day our team took a day off to go to the river near Bongo for a bath. Then we walked over to Bongo where our medical team had been working each day. The walk was a mile because the road was too rough for a passenger vehicle. Only people, horses, donkeys and goats traveled that road. (At one point we stopped to rest and watched two men digging a well with a shovel and lifting the dirt out one bucketful at a time. At that point the hole was at least 8 feet deep and they had not reached water yet.)

You can imagine our surprise when we finally entered the little village and saw hundreds of people waiting in line to see a doctor. The crowd had started the day the team had arrived and it was growing daily as the word of free medical care spread throughout the countryside. They were coming with their whole families. They came in wagons and on foot. And they were prepared to stay for days bringing pieces of tarps or old sheets to shelter them from the hot sun. Bongo was such a poor village that there wasn't even a store there to buy food. They brought with them what food they had and when that ran out they would send someone out to a town miles away to buy more.

Our team helped the medical team with crowd control. There was a process in place for them to check in, get a number, and come into the doctors when their number was called. But they insisted on staying in line so they would not miss the opportunity if they didn't hear their number. The crowd pressed closely to see the condition of people who had already been seen. They left the medical center with bottles of medicine, new glasses, some in bandages, some with great relief of having had a tooth pulled.

The atmosphere was like a party with people anxiously and hopefully crowded around, and satisfied patients fueling their hope.

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That is the mental picture I see when I read "the crowd followed him on foot from the cities. When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick." 5000 needful people crowding in with hopes of seeing the healer. And a dozen disciples trying to manage the chaos.

We usually focus our attention on Jesus and his miracle of making few resources feed that large number of people. Sometimes we focus on the crowd itself. Often we focus on the generosity of a little boy who shared his loaves and fishes, but Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels don't even mention him.

Today, however, I call your attention to the disciples in Matthew's telling of the story. Like our team that day in Bongo, we had few resources but plenty of compassion. We wanted to do more for those people who had been waiting for days, but we could do little more than give them words of encouragement.

The disciples could see no other course of action but to ask Jesus to close up shop and send the people away. Jesus knew that and yet he told the disciples "you give them something to eat.

Then Jesus proceeds to their meager resource of 5 loaves and 2 fish, look to heaven, bless the food, and break it apart. Then he gave it to the disciples. "You give them something to eat. And he did just that. Every man, woman and child ate until they were full. And there was plenty left to take to others.

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The Feeding of the 5000 in Matthew serves as story of one of the great miracles of Jesus. And it is also a parable of the work of disciples then and today. If we take it as a parable, Jesus is God in the midst of this situation of great need. Last week I explained the difference in the translation of a passage from Hebrews between Moses who interpreted the words of God and Jesus who was God speaking. We see Jesus here as God. God is the originator of good. God heals. God provides.

And the disciples struggle with their limited resources. They make their assumptions and decisions based upon what they have control over and upon their predictions of the immediate future. Do you remember that as I have been talking about John Wesley's description of the characteristics of a Methodist, I have been following his lead by using "Methodist," "Christian" and "Disciple" interchangeably.

Let's do that with this parable: God was healing and teaching the people. The Methodists wanted to send the people away because they didn't have food or lodging for them. God took what little the Methodists had, blessed it, gave it back to them and said "you give them something to eat." And the Methodists did that and everyone got fed.

Is that what has happened in our congregation of Methodists more times than we can count? We can talk about catastrophic floods and tornados. But we can also talk about families who have been up against insurmountable odds and yet God provided. We have never been a wealthy church, but we have been "rich toward God." God has always taken whatever resources we have had and multiplied them so they would meet the needs in our community with baskets of leftovers.

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 The feeding of the 5000 is a foreshadowing of what the risen Christ would commission the disciples to do with their lives. It tells of love given, Christ body broken, and the disciples sent to take Christ to every corner of the world.

This still holds true for those who accept the commission to be disciples of Christ in our generation. We will have meager personal resources, but God will somehow multiply them so we can carry them to a needful world beyond ourselves.

My brothers and sisters at Kingston Springs UMC, Do not be distressed about the future of this congregation. God will continue to provide and to multiply as the need around you demands. Love God, Love Others, Let God be God, and then use what God has given you to spread the bread of Christ.