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Series: It's a Miracle!

Title: Meal with Leftovers

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Text: [Mark 6:30-44](#)

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Today is week three of a four-week series looking at four of Jesus' miracles. We're taking one each week and one from each of the gospels, even though some are found in multiple gospels. Today's miracle—referred to as the feeding of the 5,000—is the only miracle found in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. John has the most detail, but Mark comes in a close second and that's the one we read today.

I hope you've been looking for the miraculous around you in your everyday life. I'll remind you again as to three reasons why Jesus performed miracles or signs as John calls them:

1. To show compassion and meet human need.
2. To affirm his true identity as the Son of God.
3. To provide us with a glimpse of the world that is to come.

Part of the reason I chose Mark's version is the context in which Mark places this miracle. A lot happens in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is rejected in his hometown. He sends the twelve on mission. John the Baptist is killed. Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks on water. These are all major events in Mark's narrative, and they come back to back to back in the sixth chapter. Even when we get to Mark's story of the feeding of the 5,000, it's about more than just an impressive multiplication of food. It seems it's also about believing in the possibilities when possibilities don't seem to make sense.

Booker T. Washington, the great African American educator, author, orator, and advisor to presidents, was fond of telling this story: A ship, lost at sea in the Atlantic Ocean along the northern coast of South America for many days, suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel came

the signals: "Water, water. We die of thirst." The answer from the friendly vessel came back at once: "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second time, the signal: "Water, send us water!" from the distressed vessel. And was answered again: "Cast down your bucket where you are." A third and fourth signal for water was again answered: "Cast down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket. It came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River, which extends miles out into the ocean in what is called the "River Sea."¹

In this story, a ship full of people had an urgent need for fresh water, and it was closer at hand than they knew. The sixth chapter of Mark overflows with needs as well. First, there was the need for rest. The apostles need rest. Our reading started this way: "He [Jesus] said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat" (Mark 6:31). They are worn out with the demands of their lives and the needs of others. They apparently had some food to share but not even time to eat it because of the crowds teeming around Jesus. Add to this that it is likely that Jesus recently had learned of the death of his cousin, John. Grieving people need rest and refreshment.

This story also tells us that the people had a need for leadership. Nevermind Jesus' needs and the apostles' fatigue; the crowds needed a teacher to guide them. Mark, in setting the scene for the feeding miracle that is just around the corner, tells us, "As he [again Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). I've always found that verse very moving as Jesus, despite his grief and fatigue, is energized to meet the needs of the crowds around him by the deep compassion he feels for them. One of the first and still one of the most endearing images of Jesus is that of the Good Shepherd. In fact, that's one of the identifying "I AM" phrases of Jesus in the Gospel of John: "I am the Good Shepherd." These people needed a shepherd.

Lastly, of course, is the need for food. The disciples notice that it's getting late and the people are hungry. They come to Jesus to get him to wrap it up, give the benediction. and get the crowd on its way (and out of their way). In my growing-up days, there was a man in my home church who committed one hour to church. He sat on the back row, right on the center aisle. If the sermon got a little long, and he sensed there was no end in sight, he would do a big stretch and hit two fingers on his watch. Do not, I repeat, DO NOT, get any ideas.

The disciples are even more forthright with Jesus. "When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat'" (Mark 6:35-36).

I don't get the impression that this crowd has that kind of money, or even if they did that markets would be open, but the disciples don't seem to care about that as long as they evacuate the premises.

¹ Story found at <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/88>

Essentially, the disciples responded, "We're exhausted and they are not our responsibility." Jesus thinks otherwise. This is a teaching moment to demonstrate the compassion reflex of Jesus when they look out over the crowd. Jesus sees needs that God can meet. The disciples see obligation that they want to avoid.

I can't help but contrast this scene with the church potlucks I've been to over the years. We called them potlucks in Kansas, and I've had trouble calling them pitch-ins even though I've lived in Indiana for 38 years. Wherever I've been, these church buffet lines are filled with good stuff and the tables seem to groan under the weight of all the casseroles and sides and pies and cakes. Usually the pastor or emcee of the event would give the instructions and, after an opening prayer, he or she would say something like, "We'll begin at this end of the table and go through the buffet."

There are some key differences between these church suppers and Jesus' version of a church supper in Mark 6. Of course, church suppers are planned in advance; this one with Jesus was not. Nobody brought much of anything. That causes Jesus to panic his disciples when he says, "You give them something to eat." At his orders, the disciples scout out the resources in the crowd. This is where we might want to glance over at John's version. As a kid, I always loved this story because it was a young boy who had the five loaves and two fish. "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" (John 6:9). That boy only makes an appearance in John but it was that boy that captured my imagination.

Regardless of where the disciples find the food, the findings are meager given the crowd—5,000 men says Mark, 5,000 men BESIDES WOMEN AND CHILDREN says Matthew. All the gospels agree on the amount of food—five loaves and two fish.² Jesus' version of "Let's begin with the table on my right and each table go to the buffet" is "Sit down in groups of hundreds and fifties." He then looks up to heaven and, in words that you will hear Sam say at the table in just a few minutes, he blessed, broke and gave the loaves, and set them before the disciples for distribution.

The climax of the story comes in Mark 6:42 & 43. "And all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish" (Mark 6:42-43). Some translations use the word "satisfied." They had leftovers! Do you know what leftovers are? Leftovers are a sign that everybody got all they wanted to eat, most people got more than they needed to eat, everybody was blessed, nobody went away empty, and there is still enough to do it over again. When they were growing up, our boys were a little persnickety about leftovers. They didn't eat them. Interestingly, now that they are on their own and come to our house for dinner, they are more than happy to take a Tupperware container or a Ziploc bag of leftovers home.

Five loaves of bread may sound like a lot, but it probably wasn't actually a loaf like we would buy at Kroger. It was probably more of a small wafer that was flat, hard, and brittle, about the size of a small pancake. And the fish was probably more like sardines. If indeed this was a young boy's sack lunch as I

² Comparisons from Gospel Parallels, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, copyright 1949, page 79.

prefer to believe, that would be about right. He wouldn't have had five loaves of Wonder Bread and two slabs of salmon. What that boy had was just, well, lunch. But, what made that little lunch, a big lunch, is what that boy did with that lunch when Jesus asked for it. He gave it to him.

Jesus didn't really need that boy's lunch—or wherever the five loaves and two fish came from—to feed those people. If Jesus had wanted, he could have turned rocks into bread. He could have made fish jump out of the sea into the laps of every person there. It's another part of the story that doesn't get much notice. When Jesus asks for something, it is not because he needs what we have; it is because we need to give what he asks so we can learn to trust.

What you are seeing in this story—whichever version you like best—is the way that God operates. Jesus asks for what he wants—our faith in him, our trust in him—and he will then use what we give to do great things. And here's the thing. God loves to use the little things. It is not that God can't use big things, but God loves to use the little things because that is when God gets the greatest glory and that is when God grows the greatest faith.

You may think what you have to give to God is small. You may think it is insignificant. You may think it really doesn't matter. Think of all the little things that God used to accomplish unbelievable things: a sling-shot of a shepherd boy, a widow's mite, a teenage girl, and faith the size of a mustard seed. I've been thinking about this as we prepare to report tonight at the Annual Meeting. We'll talk about finances. For 2024, we surpassed \$1M in pledges. One person didn't pledge a million dollars—280 pledges representing over 600 people did, with pledge amounts ranging from a few hundred to many thousand dollars. Each one is needed and God will use all of them.

Do you know what really determines the value of something? You can buy a major-league baseball online for about \$12. If you bought that baseball and put it in my hands it would be worth about \$12. If you put it into the hands of a top-shelf major-league pitcher, that baseball is worth millions. What made those five loaves and two fish so valuable was not how big it was, but what the boy or the people that had them in the first place did with them. The only thing you have that is of any value is what you are willing to give to God.³

You see, we are that crowd that ran around the edge of the sea to track Jesus down. We still come to Jesus for healing. We're here because we seek him. We still seek him so that we might know forgiveness and be healed. In his presence, we can discover a wholeness that replaces the brokenness that is part of our life. His word upon the shoreline is the same word he speaks today. And the result is the same, for we, too, so often live as sheep without a shepherd! We would see Jesus!

I don't know if the story that Booker T. Washington told is true, but I did look up the fact that the Amazon River does carry more fresh water out into the ocean than any river in the world creating a fresh

³ Story about baseball and connection to this miracle found at www.sermons.com in sermon by James Merritt titled, "Do You Have Any Leftovers?" on John 6:1-15.

water pool far out beyond what might be imaginable. Perhaps we underestimate our gifts and ourselves right where we are. What if, within the confines of our situations, within the gifts and abilities of people around us, within our own life stories, there were untold riches, untapped resources of fresh, cool water to nourish you, to sustain you? I invite you: "Cast down your buckets where you are," and give what you have to God and allow God to transform what you have into something wonderful. Something wonderful —with leftovers.