

The feeding of the multitude, whether five or four thousand, plus women and children or not, is found in each of the four gospels and repeated in two, so its significance in Jesus' ministry cannot be overstated. Something definitely happened. Crowds were fed from a meager offering of bread and fish, and there was an exorbitant amount of leftovers.

The multiplication of loaves and fish hearkens back to the parable of the mustard seed. The Kingdom of God produces a plentiful harvest from the smallest of seeds. So, in a similar way, this feeding of the five thousand also points to God's abundant, extravagant care that is a hallmark of God's kingdom.

Jesus is exhausted. He has been traveling around the countryside teaching and healing. He has just learned that John the Baptist has been put to death. He is seeking some rest, solitude, and prayer in the presence of God. He withdraws to a deserted place. But the crowds are relentless. They seek him out and Jesus has compassion for them.

We often emphasize the miracle found in this account, but overlook the empathy that literally moves Jesus. Jesus' compassion compels him to act. That Jesus didn't send the people away is also remarkable. People are hungry. They are hungry for healing, physically and spiritually. And they are hungry for food.

Faced with the dilemma of hunger, the disciples suggest the crowd be sent back to their towns where they can buy something to eat. Instead, Jesus tells the disciples, "You feed them," then out of meager rations, Jesus provides the means for them to do just that.

Jesus doesn't wave a magic wand. Instead, knowing it is God who provides, he looks to heaven, blesses, and breaks the bread. Only then does he give the meal into the hands of the disciples to share with the crowd. God provided this extravagant meal, but the disciples distributed it. And the twelve baskets of leftovers testify to the abundance that God provided.

Probably because I taught first grade for many years, when I hear this biblical account, I can't help but think of the folktale Stone Soup. Many of you probably know the story. Two men come into a small village and ask the townspeople for something to eat. They are refused. So, they set a pot of water to boiling in the village square, put in two stones, and promise a tasty stone soup to all. Through a bit of cajoling, they get the villagers to add their own ingredients, carrots, potatoes, leeks, and the like. Eventually, after everyone has provided something to the pot out of their own larders, the soup is ready to be shared by all. It is delicious and is pronounced a miracle. Of course, the miracle is really that everyone shared something so that everyone could be fed; no one was left hungry.

In 1848, during the Irish Potato Famine, boats sat offshore, their holds filled with potatoes. As people were starving, dying, the British Parliament decided not to distribute them so they wouldn't create a generation of people dependent on the government. In a span of 5 years, 1 million people died; most from starvation, but some from diseases that were the direct result of malnutrition. As USAID funds are drastically cut, people continue to starve throughout the world today, even as God's abundance is clearly evident.

Compassionate care for one another is the work of the Kingdom of God. We can't claim to be following Jesus if we let food rot in the fields, or in the holds of cargo ships, or in dumpsters outside restaurants, and make no effort to feed our hungry neighbors.

We live in a period of political scarcity. Our members of congress, and our local leaders would have us believe that there is not enough to go around. So, we have to cut welfare, fail to extend unemployment, and refuse to care for refugee children at our borders fleeing a kind of violence, thank God, few of us will ever know.

Being Christian we know that God's economy is not one of scarcity, but one of abundance. It's just not distributed equitably right now. When I hear today's gospel I can't help but wonder if Jesus' real miracle wasn't that in his blessing and sharing what the disciples had, everyone else dug into their pockets and brought out something they had to share; and that when they did share out of what they had, out of what God had already given them, their bounty multiplied exponentially.

We can't BE the church with a theology of scarcity. We can only BE the church when we trust in God's abundance. And that means giving out of our own abundance to further the work of the Kingdom of God. We will only truly BE the church when we can trust that when we share what we have been given out of God's abundant generosity, when we share of our time, our talent, and our treasure, we will discover we are left with more, not less. In giving generously, we will know God's abundance, not the world's scarcity, personally and as a community of faith.

The miracle that took place two thousand years ago can be our miracle today as long as we live generously in God's kingdom now. And like the many leftovers proved to the disciples, we will discover God's abundance here in this place, abundance too extraordinary to imagine.

In our Eucharistic prayer we ask God to "open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name."

May we together be strengthened and renewed to be Christ's body with a generosity of spirit and treasure, showing a broken and disheartened world, what it could look like if we all made the Kingdom of God a way of life now.