

Taking from the basket, and passing it on

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

Fr. Patrick Raymond

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He 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. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he 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. 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." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. - Mark 6:30-44

Imagine that you were one of the thousands of people that day. The morning had started out like so many others, totally predictable, until someone came through town saying that Jesus and his disciples had been spotted halfway around the lake.

Many had been talking about him lately – Jesus. They were calling him ‘the people’s rabbi’ – “*Finally, a rabbi who can actually preach!*” And the miracles. People who had been very sick were suddenly very well.

You knew the place in question, halfway around the lake, and you knew it was a long hike. But before you really thought it through, you were headed there, soon joining many others, a parade spontaneously formed out of curiosity and hope.

The crowd was so big when you got there that you ended up a long way away from Jesus. But you could hear him clearly. Even with all the people, from so many places and with so many diverse needs, the message seemed aimed at you – your heart, your life. All day, in between the teachings, there were shouts of amazement, followed by stories moving through the crowd. Another healing.

Everything was so new and amazing that you lost track of time, until the sun was low in the sky. You’ve completely forgotten about everything back home. No one even knows you’re here. And you’re famished. The same realizations and the same growing, panicky hunger are beginning to shadow the faces of others around you.

Now the disciples of Jesus are circulating and waving their arms. They’re saying, “*Organize in groups! Each group, fifty or a hundred.*” As you join a group that is forming, you hear whoops and ‘WOW!’s rising from those closest to Jesus. Children start running in

every direction, shouting, "*There's food! There's food! We need more baskets!*" Women in your group hold up their baskets. The children grab them and take them back to Jesus. And then the baskets are coming back out to the people, filled with bread and dried fish. When they're empty, the children run them back up to Jesus and his disciples.

Soon enough, one of the miracle baskets is coming your way. It's seven people away – but who's counting? Then six people. Then three. You keep an eagle eye on how much each person takes. You will pounce in judgment if anyone takes too much.

But any moment now you yourself will be deciding how much to take, or maybe how much you could get away with taking. You might be out here, far from home, all night. This might be breakfast as well. And what if you could make some fast cash from a surplus?

Just as the basket of fish and bread comes within your reach, you make two connections in quick succession. First, you remember the heavenly manna that had fed so many thousands in the wilderness, so many generations ago. Yahweh instructed them to only gather enough manna for that day. And then, just as you reach for the food, you see in your mind's eye the faces of the others behind you, still waiting for 'your basket.' All of them are just as famished and just as far from home. You end up taking only enough for this one meal.

You know beyond question that you are taking part in a miracle. Stories about what happened here today will be told over and over and over. You can imagine a time when the story will be written down, and if you were to leap forward in time to read it, you might dwell on the line that said, "*... all ate and were filled.*" All were filled with simple, sustaining food, but all were also filled with amazement and delight, caught up in a collective reverie that seemed timeless: "*... all ate and were filled.*"

When the story was written down, years later, a line would say that Jesus "*... began to teach them many things.*" Nothing he taught that day was included in the written story, however. Maybe it wasn't necessary. Maybe the miracle of the loaves and fishes was inseparable from his teaching. Maybe he was illustrating what he often called *the kingdom of God*.

You often ponder the fact that the divine miracle that day – that glimpse of the kingdom of God on earth – seemed to be joined to, maybe even rely on, the personal choices of thousands of people. Each famished soul there received and took from a basket. And in order for all to eat and be filled, each soul there also had to pass the basket along to the next hungry person.

There hasn't been a meal, however simple, since that day, that you haven't recognized the miracle of it, the blessing. All good and needful things come from the open hand of God. That part has been reassuringly easy.

But there are times, when some other full basket comes your way in life, that you do take more than you need. Sometimes, you've kept it all for yourself. And if you pay close attention, you can see how the hanging on, the hoarding, makes you feel more fearful than secure. Greed eats you alive, from the inside out.

Despite your failures, you can't forget that day, with Jesus and thousands of others, on the other side of the lake. You can't forget the look of astonished gratitude on the face of the woman who saw that the basket you passed along to her still had plenty to share. *"I guess I won't go hungry after all. Thank you."*

So you keep trying your best, when a full basket comes your way, to keep it moving. You try to do your small but sometimes surprisingly consequential part so that others down the line who are also at risk of starving can also eat. And maybe, by the way you pass the basket along and by how much you actually leave in it, those others not only eat but are filled, satisfied. And maybe they will even see and thank you for being part of a miracle. Maybe, because of you, they will have seen a glimpse of the kingdom of God on earth. *Amen.*