

Love Overflowing

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 14: 13-21

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Our gospel lesson begins, “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” When Jesus heard what? Well, if you look at the passage immediately before this one, it tells us that Jesus had heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded, he has heard that someone whom he loved and who was close to him has died, in fact was murdered, and so he wants to go and be alone, as any of us might want to do if you have just heard the same news. But, there is a problem, and the problem is that he is not us. He is Jesus, and as Jesus he is someone who doesn’t really get to be alone. Wherever he goes, people follow him. So as our Lord tries to go out into the middle of nowhere, and find some solitude, what he finds is that he is surrounded by people out in the middle of nowhere, and not just a few people, but thousands of people. Five thousand men, we are told, but also women and children, so it could be ten thousand fifteen thousand people all together. They stay for hours as Jesus heals their sick. Now, here’s the thing about crowds, and that’s that crowds present logistical problems. Crowds require planning. You remember Woodstock back in 1969. Woodstock was three day hippie fest on a farm in the middle of nowhere. And I know it was in the middle of nowhere because I was driving through the Catskills of New York one day and I happened to pass by the farm where Woodstock was held. It really isn’t close to anything. Well, back in 1969 four hundred thousand people showed up at this concert in the middle of nowhere and that was a problem, because crowds have needs. I’m sorry to share all these unpleasant details, but they need places to relieve themselves, they need places to put their garbage, they need medical attention because in a crowd of that size some people are going to

get sick, and of course they need food. How do you feed four hundred thousand people in the middle of nowhere? That was a challenge at Woodstock and that was a challenge for Jesus and his disciples. So after being out here for hours, the disciples say to Jesus this crowd needs to be told to go away, so they can make the long journey back from the middle of nowhere to the surrounding villages to buy food. But Jesus doesn't send the crowds away. Instead he says you give them something to eat. Fifteen thousand people. You twelve disciples give them something to eat. So the disciples try to reason with him. Lord, you see we have nothing to eat. We only have two fish and five loaves of bread. Oh, okay, bring these loaves and fish to me. Now, when Jesus says "Bring them here to me" that almost seems like a joke. Can you picture someone holding up two fish and five loaves of bread in front of a crowd of 15 thousand people? How absurd! It's like something you would do as a part of a comedy routine. But Jesus told the crowd to sit down on the grass, and offering the loaves and fish to heaven, we are told that everyone ate and was filled and not only were they filled. There was plenty left over. Twelve baskets full.

You know, I'm sure most of you have heard this story many times, and sometimes we call this the feeding of five thousand, or the miracle of the loaves. All my life, I've been told that this was a miracle where Jesus took the little that he was given and made it into enough food for five thousand people. Now as I've said, it was many more than five thousand. Somebody just counted all the men and then I guess they got tired of counting. But at any rate, that's what I've been taught all my life. Too little became enough. But the point of the story is that it was much more than enough. It was food overflowing. Baskets overflowing. Don't miss out on that part of the story. Don't miss out on the twelve baskets that were more than anybody could eat.

Whenever I teach my ethics classes I love when my students learn new words. And ethicists like to talk about a word I'm going to tell you about today and that's the word SUPEREROGATORY. Now, "what on earth does that mean, you say. Well, the word SUPEREROGATORY means good, but not right, or to put it a better way, perhaps, it means good but not required. Now to give you an example, think back to the time when Oprah bought everyone in her audience a car. You remember, there were all these screaming people in the audience and Oprah was up there saying you get a car and you get a car and you get a car. Maybe you do. And if you do, that's a perfect example of supererogation, of something being supererogatory. In other words, that's nice, but you don't have to do it. No one is going to think you're wrong for not buying somebody in your audience a car. No one is going to say, that Oprah, what a monster she is for not giving me a new car. Oprah doesn't owe you a new car. Or maybe this has happened to you, one time I was in line at a fast food place and I was circling around you know how you do and I got to the front window to pay for my food, and the person working there said it's no charge. I said what do you mean no charge. The guy in front of you got your meal for you. That's nice, but again, not required. I've never been in line and said how dare that person in front of me not buy my meal. Again, supererogatory. But isn't funny, most of us aren't concerned with what's supererogatory. In fact, I hadn't even heard the word until I was in graduate school. When it comes to ethics, we're only interested in what's required. We're interested in the bare minimum. What is the right thing to do. Spike Lee had a movie years ago, DO THE RIGHT THING. Wilferd Brimley, used to have that oatmeal commercial where he said it's the right thing to do. But the bare minimum is not what God does for us. What God

wants for us is to have life overflowing, grace overflowing, love overflowing. Baskets overflowing.

Henry David Thoreau said most men live lives of quiet desperation. He wrote those words in the nineteenth century, but you know and I know that these words are as true today as they were when he wrote them. Now since Thoreau's time, we have come to develop incredible technology, technology that your grandparents and maybe even your parents would never have dreamed of seeing. You can have a conversation by video with someone anywhere in the world. I have a first cousin named Margaret who lives in England, and I remember when King and I were kids we would write her letters. You wouldn't dare call, you really didn't even want to make a long distance call between states back then, it was so expensive. So we would write these letters that would take I don't know, two weeks to cross the ocean. Now, all I have to do is Skype and see her right there. It's amazing. We have self-driving cars. We have computers that can respond to voice commands. It seems that there's nothing we can't do. But for all that we can do, there is nothing we have done to change the fact that most people live just as Thoreau says they live. Most people live out lives of quiet desperation. How many people do you know who work their whole lives in some job that they hate? Every day they wake up and drag themselves to work for thirty five years spending eight hours doing something they can't stand just so they can make a living. They have kids that they don't know how to talk to, they have spouses they don't know how to talk to. And there is nothing that all the progress we have made as a civilization has ever done to change that. But God has not intended for life to be that way. The twenty-third psalm says "Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over"--- not "my cup is half full" not even "my cup is filled to the rim" but "my cup runneth over" Of

course, nowadays the bible translations say my cup overflows. That doesn't quite roll off the tongue in the same way, does it? My grandmother used to say I don't want my cup to overflow, I want my cup to runneth over. But whether you say runneth over or overflow that's what God intends for our lives. Jesus said why do you worry saying what will we eat, what will we wear, consider the lilies they neither toil nor spin, and yet King Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as one of these. And if God so clothes the grass of the fields that is here today and gone tomorrow, will he not clothe you, ye of little faith. Why do you worry saying what shall we eat, what shall we wear? Psychologists say we are in the midst of an anxiety epidemic. Anxiety is everywhere. But why do you worry? Jesus says. Why are you anxious? If God clothes the lilies of the field in decadent splendor, won't he also care for you. Have you ever heard someone say I love to go to church because it helps me get through the week. You know, If I had a dime for every time I heard someone say I go to church because it helps me get through the week, there's no telling how much money I'd have. I go to church because it helps me get through the week. Well, let me tell you a secret. God doesn't just want to get you through the week, God's intention for life is not just so you can barely hang on. What God intends is baskets overflowing. Cups that runneth over.

When we see people living in poverty well below the quality of life that some animals enjoy, we see life that is not the way God intended it. When we see other people getting rich off their poverty, because they are desperately afraid that what they have is going to run out, we see life that is not the way that God intended it. When we see people who hold grudges against people in their own families long past the point where they even remember what the grudge is about, we see life that is not the way that God intended it. When we see worry

instead of faith, fear instead of hope, and hurt that has hardened into anger and even rage, we do not see life the way God intended it. I do not know when we will see life lived as God intended it in our society and in our world. But there is one thing I do know. Never accept that the way things are is the way God intends them to be. Never accept that the way things are is the way God intends them to be.

It has become a cliché by now. But years ago I remember being in an audience when someone held up a half-full or half-empty glass of water and asked the audience to tell him whether the glass was half full or empty. And then he went on to explain that everyone who said the glass was half-empty was a pessimist and everyone who said the glass was half-full was an optimist. Surely you've heard that before. Folks, let me tell you something, I'm all for being optimistic. I think we all could use more optimism in our lives. But optimism is not the gospel. Years ago, Norman Vincent Peale wrote *The Power of Positive thinking* where he compared the gospel to positive thinking. It was one of the worst books ever written. The gospel is not about settling for life as it is and looking on the bright side. God doesn't want our cups to be half-full. He wants them to runneth over. He wants our baskets to runneth over.