

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 13, Series A (Pentecost 9)
Saturday, August 1st, 2020
Sunday, August 2nd, 2020 (Commissioning and Installation of a Director of Christian Education)

Sermon: A Lot from a Little

Text: Matthew 14:13-21

Focus: God takes what little we have and multiplies it back to us in abundance

Function: That they would not doubt God's power or undersell themselves for his service.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "For all this it is our duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him" (SC, 1st Article of Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. When Marie Antoinette, the queen of France, was informed that the peasants were starving—"The people have no bread!"—she replied with her infamous quip: "Then let them eat cake!" How unreasonable! How out of touch with reality could she be? "Off with her head!"

Yet Jesus' words to the disciples in today's Gospel reading sound no less preposterous. "They need not go away. *You* give them something to eat" (Matt. 14:16b, ESV).¹ But how could the twelve apostles feed a crowd of "about five thousand men, besides women and children" (v. 21)? Where could they find enough bread to buy to feed a crowd of more than five thousand people, even if they had the funds to do so? Isn't it just like the boss to delegate his dream for the rest of the team to figure out?

"We have only five loaves here and two fish," the disciples replied (v. 17). The disciples would have none of Jesus' nonsense. The disciples were nothing, if not practical. They were fishermen and tax collectors. They knew how to count: five loaves, two fish, twelve disciples, and thousands of hungry stomachs. The math didn't add up.

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Try to imagine the logistics of trying to feed five or six thousand people at one time. That's about the size of an aircraft carrier crew! According to an article in *Stars and Stripes*, on a carrier 114 sailors work the galleys nearly around the clock to prepare three meals a day, which amounts to 17,300 meals. "In a day, the ship's crews can go through 1,600 pounds of chicken, 160 gallons of milk, 30 cases of cereal and 350 pounds of lettuce."² (*Aside: 350 pounds of lettuce? That's a lot of rabbit food!*)

But the disciples only had one meal to serve. So divide the Navy's numbers by 3 and you get 533 pounds of chicken, 53 gallons of milk, 6 cases of cereal, and 117 pounds of lettuce to feed the crowd of five thousand men, plus women and children. And I'd imagine they'd want some gravy with their chicken and some tomatoes and dressing on the salad. All of that adds up to a lot of food, an exorbitant cost, and a wearying task! Plus, the Navy has time to prepare, but Jesus' command came at the spur of the moment. Put simply, feeding 5,000 people would be a logistical nightmare.

I know many preachers rightly make much of Jesus' call for his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. But now I think the real moment of testing, when the temptation to quit may have been the greatest, was when Jesus put the Twelve on kitchen duty.

"You give them something to eat" (Matt. 14:16b).

"We have only five loaves here and two fish." The disciples had little, but Jesus demanded a lot. What could be done?

² https://www.stripes.com/news/what-does-it-take-to-feed-an-aircraft-carrier-on-a-combat-mission-about-17-300-meals-1.527749?fbclid=IwAR23U45xdU04_Ng1ITnwbqNjRwH0wVQE2mEiJQFgooWFq6EREj0Pm09zoT0

Jesus told them to bring the bread and fish to him. So they did. Then Jesus told the crowd to sit down and prepare to eat. Imagine the faces of the disciples as they exchanged worried glances and rolled at their eyes at the Master's insanity.

But Jesus took the bread and fish, said a blessing, broke the bread, and gave them back to the disciples.

These four verbs are significant: take, bless, break, give. The same verbs are used by the Gospel writers when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and visited the Emmaus disciples on the first Easter (Matt. 26:26; Luke 24:30). Take, bless, break, and give—always together, over and over again.

So the disciples give the bread and fish to Jesus. He takes the food, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it back to the disciples. And now watch what happens: the disciples give the food to the crowd. "And they all ate and were satisfied" (Matt. 14:20). Everyone had their fill, and they picked up twelve *baskets* full of leftovers. Even after feeding five thousand plus people, the disciples ended up with *more* bread than they began with. Jesus provided. He took what little they had, blessed it, broke it, and gave it back to them in abundance—more than they ever dreamed or imagined. In other words, in the hands of Jesus, you can get a *lot* from a little. The disciples suffered from a scarcity mentality, but Jesus came to give abundant life—life "to the full" (John 10:10, NIV). Instead of showing the practicality of the cynical disciples who want to shoo away the crowds, Jesus has compassion on them (vv. 14-15). He heals them, teaches them, and *feeds* them—yes, with bread for their stomachs, but also the bread of life (cf. John 6). "And they all ate and were satisfied."

So how did it work? What was the mechanism for the miracle? When Jesus broke the bread, did the pieces balloon to enormous size? Did they grow back every time the disciples

broke off a piece? Or did their baskets simply never run out? When they turned away, did Jesus restock them? How did he *do* it? Matthew already tells us: take, bless, break, and give. Jesus can do a lot with a little.

So what does this mean for Christians in the 21st century? What does it mean for the Church as a whole? And what does it mean for Kristin Schmidt, in particular, on this, the day of her commissioning and installation into the ministry of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod?

Perhaps in Douglas County, Colorado, one of the richest counties in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, we don't know much about scarcity. Most of our neighbors don't suffer from hunger, even during the pandemic. The worst kind of shortage we know is the frustration of the toilet paper hoarding that took place in March and April.

But that doesn't mean everyone in Castle Rock is well off or well to do. Local food banks faced enormous demand as families faced unemployment and uncertainty. How could the Help and Hope Center and Front Range Community Church feed the need? Through the donations that the church community gave to help our neighbors. A can of chili here, a box of macaroni there... After a while, it all adds up. If we're not afraid to give, God can do a lot with a little.

What about all of you? Do ever look at yourself and wonder how you ever could possibly serve God with all your faults and failures? Who am I? What can I offer? I'm just an old man, a little girl, a poor, uneducated nobody, "a poor, miserable sinner" (*TLH*). What worthy service could I possibly offer to God?

These questions remind me of the protests spoken by the prophets and apostles down through the centuries. Moses stuttered: "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent..., but I am slow of speech and of tongue" (Ex. 4:10). Jeremiah felt too young, and the Lord had to tell him, "I am

only a youth” (Jer. 1:7). Isaiah was a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips (Isa. 6:5). Joshua and Gideon were afraid (Joshua 1 and Judges 6). Esther could have died. Mary wondered, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). And Peter said simply, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8).

And to each of them, the Lord said essentially the same thing: “Don’t be afraid. I am with you. I forgive your sins. And I will tell you what to say and where to go.” No matter how small or ill prepared or unqualified the Lord’s servants feel, he can still use them. He can get a lot out of a little. Rather than calling the qualified, he qualifies the ones he calls. He equips and readies them for the task. “For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

You don’t ever have to be the smartest, fastest, strongest, richest, wisest, or best looking person to serve the Lord. You just have to be *you*. He’ll take what you have, bless it, break it, and give it back to you to give to somebody else. And no matter what you have to offer, whether it’s five loaves and two fish or a lifetime of ministry, God will do a lot with whatever little you think you are or have.

On this day of Kristin’s commissioning, I remember my own ordination more than thirteen years ago. Of course, I was excited to celebrate the beginning of “my” ministry (of course, it’s never “my” ministry; it’s always the Lord’s ministry). Becoming a pastor is what I’d worked for and studied for during eight years of college and seminary preparation. But I was also full of fear and self-doubt. Who was I to think that I could be a pastor? Did I really have what it takes—the “right stuff”? What if I messed up and said or did the wrong thing?

I was only 25 years old, and most of my parishioners were well over the age of 60. They had more life experience than I. What could *I* possibly teach *them*?

But over the past 13 years, the Lord has used a wretched, prideful sinner like me to love and lead people to Jesus. I've baptized adults and babies, heard people's confessions at their death beds, preached the Word in season and out of season, and served the Lord's Supper thousands of times. God can do a lot with a little—even from someone like me.

Kristin, the Lord Jesus is going to do a lot with a little from you. You are a smart, talented, caring person, and, as I've often told you, I don't know any other pastor or DCE who knows the Bible as well as you do. Children love you—and so do the old ladies! Your friend Melissa was right: you are a “creative Christian genius.” The Lord has blessed you abundantly, preparing and equipping you for this new call and journey in ministry and life.

But you're also a sinner like us—in need of daily forgiveness. And even though you've survived your internship during a global pandemic, new challenges and temptations are sure to come. Even though the congregation loves you, some people will criticize you. One of these days, you might even open your e-mail to read a nasty-gram that will ruin your day or week. A smattering of criticism will always sting more than a thousand compliments can heal. At times you may wonder if you were crazy for ever going into ministry in the first place. So let me reassure you now that yes, you *are* crazy; you *have* to be a little crazy in order to serve in the kingdom of God.

Yet no matter how small or insignificant the devil, the world, and your flesh might make you feel, always remember that God can do a lot with a little, whether it's feeding five thousand or feeding us with the Bread of Life. With plain water combined with God's Word, he washed away your sins and gave you his name and Holy Spirit. With a little bit of bread and a little bit of wine, he forms a feast of Jesus' body and blood that forgives your sins and guarantees your

resurrection on the Last Day. And with a poor Jewish carpenter nailed to a wooden cross with iron nails, he saved you—and the whole world!

God can do a lot with a little. He *has* done a lot with a little *for* you. And he can do a lot with a little *from* you. The world needs to hear about Jesus and his love. They need the Bread of Life. So *you*, give them something to eat. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.