

"A Little Goes a Long Way in the Hands of Jesus"

Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*

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(Mt. 14:13-21)

Introduction.

In his book *Reaching Out* the late Catholic author Henri Nouwen writes that while he was visiting the University of Notre Dame where he had once been a professor, he met with a friend who was an older teacher and had spent most of his life at the university. While they walked across the beautiful campus, the older professor said with a certain melancholy in his voice, “You know, my whole life I’ve complained that my work was constantly being interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.”

Nouwen reflected on this experience and he writes, “Don’t we often look at the many events of our lives as big or small interruptions, interrupting many of our plans, projects and life schemes? Don’t we feel an inner protest when a student interrupts our reading, bad weather our summer, illness our well-scheduled plans, and the many harsh realities of life our good dreams about it? But what if our interruptions are our opportunities... [to] come into the fullness of our being? What if the events of our history are molding us as a sculptor molds his clay, and if it is only in a careful obedience to these molding hands that we can discover our real vocation and become mature people?”¹

Interruptions are a part of life, aren't they? Things come our way unexpectedly, and they throw us off schedule. How do we respond when this happens? Do we see them as irritations, or do we view them as perhaps God's divine appointments? In the passage we've read today, we encounter a time when Jesus and His disciples were interrupted, and they were diverted from their original plan. What can we learn from them how they dealt with this challenge? As we shall see, there are times when God's interruptions can lead to a miracle.

I. The Withdrawal of Jesus.

"When Jesus heard what had happened [to John], He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place" (14:13). At the time of Christ Galilee was an area where it was very difficult to be alone. I've been to Galilee, and it's not very big. It measures only 50 miles from north to south and 25 miles from east to west. Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived at the time of Christ, tells us that in the first century AD within the small region of Galilee there were 204 towns and villages, and none of them had a population of less than 15,000 people. That's

over 3 million people! In such a heavily populated area, it was very difficult to get away and be by yourself.

However, on the other side of the Sea of Galilee it was quiet, and at its widest the lake is only 8 miles wide. Jesus' disciples were fishermen, and it wasn't difficult to get a boat and seek some solitude on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. That's what Jesus did when He heard about the death of His cousin John the Baptist.

There were at least three reasons I think Jesus withdrew from the crowds. *First*, He withdrew because *He was concerned for His own safety*. If John had been beheaded, it was natural to be concerned that He might be next. And even though He wasn't afraid to die, He knew His time had not yet come.

A *second* reason Jesus withdrew was *for spiritual refreshment*. Mark's gospel tells us that this happened after the disciples had returned from a preaching mission (Mk. 6), and Jesus knew that He and His disciples needed to get away for spiritual reflection, debriefing, and simply some rest.

But there's a *third* reason I think Jesus withdrew from the crowds, and *it was to grieve* the death of His dear friend and cousin, John the Baptist. They had grown up together, playing at family reunions, chasing one another playing tag. They both had been called by God to powerful ministries, and each had a unique sense of their own history and destiny. It was John who had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, and he was the one who said, "Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sins of the world." He had been the first to recognize just who Jesus really was. So, it was only natural for the Lord to grieve the loss of His cousin and friend.

Sometimes I think we try to be too stoic, too strong in times of hardship and loss, and we don't allow ourselves the opportunity to feel the pain and simply grieve. Maybe you're in a spot like that right now. Maya Angelou once wrote, "Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us. We need hours of endless wandering or spates of time sitting on park benches, observing the mysterious world of ants and the canopy of tree tops." Sometimes we just need to get away and grieve.

Even the Lord Jesus Christ sensed the need to be alone. Do you need to do this yourself in this season of your life? If so, when are you going to put it on your calendar and make it happen? How is God calling you to withdraw to be alone with Him?

II. The Pursuit and Need of the Crowd.

"Hearing of this, the crowds followed Him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said, 'This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.' Jesus replied, 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat'" (14:13-16).

The rest and solitude that Jesus sought, He wasn't able to get because the people saw Him and they figured out where He was headed. Since the Sea of Galilee is only 8 miles wide, it's not difficult to see how a crowd of people could walk around the northern edge of the lake and meet them on the other side.

Jesus had every right to be annoyed with the crowd because they prevented Him from getting the rest He and His disciples needed and deserved. But instead of being irritated, Jesus responded with compassion and love. He saw the multitude as "sheep without a shepherd", and He began to heal the sick among them. The interruption became an opportunity to serve.

As the day grew late, Jesus' disciples became concerned. They were in a desolate place, and there wasn't a Chick Fil A nearby to feed such a large crowd, so they suggested that Jesus dismiss the people so they could go and get some food for themselves in the neighboring towns and villages. But Jesus didn't see the situation like that. He recognized that it was indeed late in the day, but instead of agreeing to send them away, Jesus suggested the disciples give them something to eat!

But the disciples weren't looking for another ministry opportunity. They were wanting a break. "Hey Jesus, it's time for a retreat, remember?! We're supposed to head out to a quiet, solitary place. How about a nice intimate dinner with just us guys!" In other words, the disciples responded by saying, "Lord, this isn't our problem. Send the people away."

Amy Carmichael was a missionary to South India for 53 years during the 19th and 20th centuries, and she founded the Dohnavur Fellowship which was a shelter for girls who were trying to escape Hindu temple prostitution. Early in her ministry she had an experience of great disappointment in which a young girl with whom she had been working for a long time and with whom she had made great progress returned to the temple and to her old way of life.

Broken-hearted over the situation, Amy fell on her knees, and in anger and sadness she cried out to God and said, "This is not my problem! This is not my problem!" As she wept, in the silence of her tears she heard the Lord say to her, "You're right, Amy. This isn't your problem. It's my problem. But I'm just looking for someone to help me with it."²

Jesus had compassion on the people in the crowd, so He healed the sick and He ministered to their physical needs. Their problems became His problems, and that led to the next great miracle.

III. The Feeding of the 5,000.

This is the only miracle Jesus performed that is recorded in all 4 of the gospels. John tells us that Andrew, one of the disciples, was the one who found the young boy who had the five barley loaves and two fish, but even he adds, "What is that among so many?" Barley was the cheapest and coarsest of all breads, and it was the food of the poor. And the two fish were about the size of large sardines. They were little salt fish that were eaten as relish with the dry rolls. Not much of an inventory to feed so many people. But of all the evangelists Matthew is the only one who reports that Jesus said, "Bring the loaves and fish to me." In the hands of Jesus, a little bit can go a long way.

The text tells us that after ordering the people to sit on the grass, Jesus took the loaves and the fish, and *"looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves."* Then the Bible says that a miracle occurred right before their very eyes. The loaves and the fish were multiplied as Jesus continued to give them to His disciples, and they in turn gave it to the people. 5,000 people, not counting the women and children, were fed that day, and Matthew adds a little feature – they all ate and were satisfied. And in the end, they had twelve basketsful of bread left over!

I think it's important to note that this passage teaches us that Jesus wasn't just concerned about the spiritual needs of people. He was also concerned with their physical needs as well. NT scholar Dale Bruner writes, "Jesus is Lord even of physical need. Just as He did not yield before the most intractable human problems, even death, so He is not impotent before the massive social problem of hunger. This material fact has always been a major lesson of the Gospel's Feeding stories, and...whenever the social question has been acute, these stories have reminded the church of how social her Lord is. Jesus not only cares about hungry people – He does something (and motivates His church to do something). What He does is important to notice. He does not give tracts, advise fasting, or counsel patient resignation. He feeds."³

A question you and I need to ask ourselves is since feeding hungry people was a high priority for Jesus, what are we doing to address the problem of hunger in the world ourselves? It's really a question of discipleship. How will we join Jesus in His concern for hungry people?

Did you know that a recent study revealed that 1 in 9 people in the world today don't get enough to eat? That's larger than the number of people in the United States, Canada and the European Union combined. In addition, 34 million children

suffer from severe acute malnutrition today, and one million children die each year from hunger-related causes.⁴

Closer to home the greater Winston-Salem area was ranked the worst metro area in the United States in having families with children which had a hard time putting food on the table. Nearly 35 percent of households with children in our county said “yes” when asked if there were times in the course of the year when they didn’t have enough money to buy food.⁵

What Jesus said to the disciples back then, He says to you and me, “You give them something to eat.” So, what are you and I going to do to try and fulfill His request? What is one thing you and your family can do in the coming week to try and address the problem of hunger in the world today?

Conclusion.

This miracle reminds us that a little bit goes a long way in the hands of Jesus. With Christ there is a new kind of math: $5+2+Jesus = 5,000$. He can take what we give Him, whatever it is, and multiply it in such a way that His work of grace is extended. We may not think we have much to offer, and we may not think that we can solve the problem ourselves, but with Jesus a little bit goes a very long way.

I close with this. Many years ago, I went to India on a short-term mission trip with the Presbyterian Outreach Foundation, and there I learned a great deal from the simple faith and the pattern of life of Christians in that country. In a village we visited, we discovered that believers in that poor part of the world understand how a little bit goes a long way in the hands of the Savior, and they are generous in sharing with others.

We learned that at every meal at their house, believers set a place for Jesus at the table, and they also set out a portion of uncooked rice and put it on the plate for Jesus. They are honoring the fact that He is there with them at their meal. All week long they gather these servings of uncooked rice and put them in a jar. And on Sunday, the whole family fasts and gives all the rice they would have eaten that day. They put that uncooked rice in the jar as well. Then on Saturday afternoon, these followers of Christ take the jar to the market and sell the rice for whatever price it brings. The next day they bring the money to worship and give it as an offering to help others. In these tiny villages in a very remote part of India, the people are helping to support others who are in need in neighboring towns, and they do it all with the sacrifice of uncooked rice. That’s an example for all of us to think about.

Remember, little goes a long way in the hands of Jesus. What are the five loaves and the two fish you have that you can sacrifice for Christ? And how is God calling you to share what He has given you with others and trust Him for a miracle?

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, pp. 52,53.

²Source unknown.

³F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, Vol. 2, p. 526,527.

⁴ Source: https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/hunger-facts?gclid=CjwKCAiArOnUBRBJEiwAX0rG_XIIIGFAONzxF1TYotGDggUK3hacMiheeAAjVafO1vcrD59ddMp2xhoC1IAQAvD_BwE.

⁵ Source: http://www.journalnow.com/news/local/hunger-study-calls-area-worst-in-u-s/article_136ce0c7-6763-5cb9-9e39-3f23dd0113ec.html.