

Feeding Stories

We're going to return now to the stories of Jesus that we find in the Gospel of Mark, what we believe, from the testimony of the early Church Fathers, were the recollections of one of the leading disciples, Peter, as told to Mark, a young believer in the early church. And today we're going to look at a couple of "feeding stories" - incidents where Jesus used a small donation of bread and fish and used it to feed thousands of hungry people.

The first account is from Mark 6, starting at v. 30:

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, "Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So He began teaching them many things.

By this time it was late in the day so His disciples came to Him, "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But He answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to Him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" He asked. "Go and see."

When they found out, they said, "Five - and two fish."

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to His disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was 5000. (Mark 6:30-44)

The first thing we notice is that Jesus' disciples have just returned from their first missionary journey, healing the sick and delivering people from demonic oppression. They have lots of stories to tell Jesus about the ministry they've been doing, but the crowds are so demanding that they don't even have time to eat and so Jesus says, "Let's get away for a bit. You need some rest so let's find someplace quiet." I find it interesting that this is one of only two places in Mark's Gospel where the twelve are called "the apostles". The other is when Jesus chooses twelve men to be His disciples and the text, in Mark 3:14, says that He designated them as apostles so that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. The word "apostle" comes from a word that means "sent one", a missionary, someone who goes out to minister, and it is used when Jesus appoints

twelve men to be His representatives, His “sent ones” and then again here, in Mark 6, when they are just returning from being sent out in ministry.

But any hope of a quiet retreat is soon dashed. They get in the boat and sail across the Sea of Galilee to some remote spot, only to find that the crowds have outguessed them, have run around the north end of the lake and are waiting for them there.

What do you think your reaction would have been if you and your family were trying to get to a quiet place and thousands of people seemed to want to hang around wherever you were? Would you be frustrated as you got out of that boat and started to walk towards the people? The text tells us that Jesus felt compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and so He began to teach them.

The very practical disciples notice that it’s getting late and that they are in a remote place and that there are no burger joints anywhere around, so they make a very practical suggestion to their Master: “Why don’t you get the crowds to disperse for a bit so they can go into the nearby villages and get some food?” And Jesus says the last thing they expected Him to say:

You give them something to eat!

Are you kidding me, Jesus? That’s a working man’s wage for 2/3 of a year. We aren’t carrying that kind of cash around! And if we were, we wouldn’t be spending it on feeding the masses. “Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

Of course, Jesus knew that they couldn’t afford it, that they didn’t carry that much on them, that Judas had been “borrowing” money from their bag of funds and that there wouldn’t be enough in there to feed fifty, let alone 5000. And so He asks them a strategic question, one that will open the door to a miracle:

“How many loaves do you have? Go and see.”

Let’s start with what you’ve got ... we can go from there. Isn’t that a life-changing question? That’s the pivot point of this whole story: “How many do you have? Go and check it out.”

So the disciples start walking through the crowds asking people if they have anything they could share with the rest of the people. Mostly, the answer is, ‘no’, but when they get back to Jesus they have something - “we’ve got five loaves here ... and two fish.” Can you imagine looking out at a crowded restaurant with people at every table - maybe 120 people out there - and someone in the kitchen says, “All we’ve got left back here is five loaves of bread and two fish.” If you were the owner, or manager, you would probably start to panic. But Jesus is facing a crowd of 5000 men, plus women and children and His response is - “Well, that’s something; have the people sit down in groups on the grass.”

You have to have a little imagination to picture this scene. Jesus and His disciples are standing there with five loaves of bread and two fish and people are sitting down on the

ground in groups of fifty or a hundred. Five loaves would barely do anything to dent the hunger of one group of fifty, but here you see expectant groups of people scattered over the hillside - fifty here, then a hundred next to them, two more groups of a hundred each just below, then three groups of fifty each and a couple more groups of a hundred. And that's just over on this little bank to your left. Straight in front of you there are 10 more scenes just like that one - or maybe 12 or 15 of them. Thousands of people and you're standing there with five loaves and two fish.

The next thing that happens is that Jesus takes the food and looks up to heaven. He gives thanks for the loaves and breaks them and hands them to His disciples to set before the people. The text doesn't tell us that Jesus multiplied the bread and fish, that He kept busy for 3/4 of an hour breaking off more pieces of bread and more pieces of fish. The text says that He broke the bread and fish and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the thousands of people gathered there that day. It looks to me like the miracle of multiplication took place as the disciples went from group to group, breaking off more pieces of bread and fish and handing them to person after person.

Years ago, I heard a story with a very similar theme and outcome. It was on a Youth With a Mission base, I think in south-east Asia, and the base had a number of visitors coming for this one meal -- but also a shortage of food. The teenagers were the first to go through the food line-up and when they were done there wasn't much left. The staff behind the counters couldn't think of anything they could do except to pray ... "Jesus, You multiplied loaves and fishes and fed thousands; please do it again with our nearly empty pots." Another eighty to a hundred people went through the line and there was enough left at the end for the staff to serve their own meals - Jesus had done it again. But He didn't do it with a big "whoosh!" and presto, there's a new pot of hot rice on the counter. It was just one person at a time, supplying the food to meet their needs and ensuring there was enough for the one next in line. What a faith-building miracle that was for the people at that meal, and what a joy to tell others through the years.

The text of this story in Mark 6 ends by saying that they all ate and were satisfied. It doesn't say that they all had a taste of bread, a sample of fish. It says that they ate enough to satisfy them and that there were twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish left over - much more than they started out with! They started with five pitas, maybe, and two fish, and ended up with 12 basketfuls of broken pieces ... and they were stuffed. Thousands of them.

And then, it happens all over again. Mark 8:1-1-9:

About this time another great crowd had gathered, and the people ran out of food again. Jesus called His disciples and told them, "I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with Me for three days, and they have nothing left to eat. And if I send them home without feeding them, they will faint along the road. For some of them have come a long distance."

"How are we supposed to find enough food for them here in the wilderness?" His disciples asked

"How many loaves of bread do you have?" He asked.

“Seven,” they replied. So Jesus told all the people to sit down on the ground. Then He took the seven loaves, thanked God for them, broke them into pieces, and gave them to His disciples, who distributed the bread to the crowd. A few small fish were found, too, so Jesus also blessed these and told the disciples to pass them out. They ate until they were full and when the scraps were picked up, there were seven large baskets of food left over! There were about 4000 people in the crowd that day and He sent them home after they had eaten.

There are six accounts in the four Gospels about Jesus feeding masses of people on small amounts of food - two in Matthew and in Mark and one each in Luke and John. This is obviously a miracle that mattered a lot to those who were writing the gospels, but why does it have particular importance? Let's look for some clues.

1. Notice that the bread is emphasized and the fish is treated as having secondary importance. In both accounts, Jesus broke the loaves first and then He broke the fish, almost as an afterthought.
2. Notice also that these events take place in an area described as “wilderness” or “a desolate place”. The crowds which have followed Jesus have followed Him far from their homes and, as it turns out, far from a good supply of food.
3. Notice, too, the arrangement of people in the Mark 6 passage into groups of fifty and one hundred.
4. And finally, we need to be aware that people who are like sheep without a shepherd experience the grace and compassion of their true shepherd as Jesus does the miracle that meets their needs.

When you think of how the New Testament reflects and builds on the stories and teaching of the Old Testament, you can see a strong parallel between the feeding stories of the Gospels and the feeding of a million and a half Israelites during their wilderness wanderings.

1. The emphasis on the bread is because it so closely parallels the manna which fed Israel in the wilderness.
2. The isolation and desolation of the places Jesus taught in parallels that of the wilderness of Sinai.
3. The arrangement of people in groups of 50 or 100 parallels the arrangement in the wilderness where Moses appointed people as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.
4. Just as the people needed a leader to shepherd them through the escape from Egypt and the years of wilderness wanderings, so Jesus has become the compassionate shepherd to those who have been led to follow Him into the new wilderness.

One more observation about this:

The prophets spoke about the Lord transforming the wilderness into a place of growth and fruitfulness and, at least in the Mark 6 passage, Jesus instructs the people to be seated on the green grass. Already this provides a new perspective on the wilderness; the Lord is bringing fruitfulness, abundance, to this place. What the prophets had indicated was that God would be the shepherd who would care for the needs of His people. Here's a great example from Ezekiel 34:

For this is what the Sovereign Yahweh says: I Myself will search for My sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after My sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I Myself will tend My sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. (34:11-15)

This is much more than a story of Jesus responding to the immediate needs of thousands of people who have followed Him to a place where He has been teaching them. This is a story about how God is fulfilling His promise to come to be with His people, to lead them to pasture, to shepherd them with loving care, to be their Deliverer and Redeemer.

Now, let's look at some applications from the feeding stories of Mark 6 and Mark 8:

1. One of the most practical and powerful lessons from these stories comes from Jesus' conversation with the disciples in Mark 6:38 - "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus doesn't want us to focus on what we don't have, where we feel inadequate, where we want more training, more resources, more experience. He wants us to look at what has already been provided. "What do you have?" is such an important question for us to ask. "What has God already given to you and how do you think He wants you to use it?"
2. A second application is for us to look out beyond our present circumstances, our current prayer requests, the challenges we face today, and try to imagine what God is doing in the big picture. These scenes from Mark's account of Jesus' ministry are scenes that are full of insight into what God was doing: He had come to shepherd His people, to satisfy their hunger, to show them love, compassion, and to give them hope. He was fulfilling Old Testament prophecies and doing so in a way that was rich with symbolism and depth of meaning. When we look at what God is doing in the world today, we gain greater insights by looking at the backdrop of Old and New Testaments, by looking at the promises and prophecies from those periods and by trusting that His unchanging character and purposes will bring about what He is working towards.
3. On the most basic level of application, we come to the place of simply saying, "Jesus knows what you need and He knows what I need. Our job, our role in this exchange, is to trust Him to take care of us." What we learn about Jesus in these stories is that He has compassion for people in their need, even for a simple need like food, that He sees Himself as our shepherd, someone who can lead us to a place of nurture and refreshment, and as our Teacher who will guide us into the truth of who He is and what He offers us. Right after the second account of feeding the multitudes in chapter 8, Jesus warns the disciples to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod. They think He's telling them this because they forgot to bring bread with

them. And Jesus says, "Don't you get it yet? When I fed the 5000, how many baskets of food did you pick up afterwards? And when I fed the 4000, how many baskets of bread did you pick up?" He wants them to understand that they don't need to worry about bread, about survival, about His ability to provide for His followers. And He asks them at the end, "Do you still not understand?"

And that's the question He asks of us when we worry and fret about some negative possibility that lies ahead of us. "Do you still not understand that I love you and am caring for you?" And when things don't go according to our plan, can we have faith to believe that there's a possibility that He has a better plan? Let's trust Him; let's trust Him ... more and more.