The Feeding of the 5,000
Mark 6: 30-44

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.

* This story begins with fatigue.

For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

(6:31b)
They were tired from doing good things! I bet you know about that! Work, family responsibilities, church, school, community involvement, aging parents, the dog, the cat, the house, the cars, the bills. And then you do it all over again! And you need to read your Bible, up your pledge, and don’t forget to floss your teeth! You can get tired from doing all those good things!

The disciples are tired, and in his compassion, Jesus recognizes that they need a break. He responds;

‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ (6:31)

That sounds wonderful, but it didn’t work!

* They’re already exhausted and here’s what happens next.

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived there ahead of them. (6:33)

Sometimes you can’t get away from it. Why is it that in times of our greatest fatigue we are often called upon to provide our greatest service? When you don’t have much left is when somebody wants some more.

They’re in the middle of a deserted place with over 5,000 people. Count the women and children and it’s probably more like 15,000-20,000 people. That would be like a small county fair out in the middle of nowhere, with no lights, no facilities and no food. It’s loud. It’s noisy. It’s the last place you want to be when you are tired.

Here’s what Jesus saw:

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. (6:34)

So even though he has compassion for his disciples, he also has compassion for the world as well.

* But the disciples saw something else. They came up with a plan.

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.’ (6:35-36)

Now that sounds like a compassionate plan, but was it? It looks like the disciples care about the world too, but you have to wonder. “Send them away?” Sometimes it’s easier for the Church to come up with a plan than it is to discern God’s will for a plan.

I can almost hear Jesus saying,

‘Thank you so much! I had no idea that it was so late. What would I do without you disciples telling me what time it is? Nor was I aware that this is a deserted place. I would be totally lost without you giving me all this information! And, of course we’re going to send all these people away. We’re tired. We need to take care of ourselves first, then we can worry about the people in need.’

Here’s what he did say;

‘You give them something to eat.’ (6:37)

That’s absurd. 15,000 people – 12 disciples? It’s totally impractical. So, they ask;

‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii (that’s a year’s salary) worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?’ (6:37b)

They’re being “chippy!” Jesus is illogical. It doesn’t make any sense. It’s probably poor stewardship. “Do you really want us to waste all that money on just one little meal for all these people? We’ll have nothing to show for it.”

But instead of yielding to logic, Jesus said;

‘How many loaves have you? Go and see.’ (6:38a)

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Wouldn’t you love to have been at that meeting when the disciples were trying to figure out what they were going to go back and tell Jesus? Somebody looked in the bag and said,

‘All we have is five loaves of bread and two fish. That’s it. You might as well give him the whole thing because it’s obvious that’s not going to be enough. He’ll send them away.’

Somebody else could have said,
‘Well, technically, we only have to give him a tenth! Cut the bread and the fish up into ten parts and give him 1/10th and we’ll keep 9/10ths and at least we will have fulfilled our obligation and we’ll have something to eat.’

Another one could have said,
‘I think we just hide the bag and after they’re all gone, we pull it out and say we forgot about it. Maybe Jesus won’t know what we really have. Let’s just hoard our assets.’

I bet that was an interesting meeting. The end result was they went to him with the five loaves and the two fish.

Maybe that was an act of faithfulness, I don’t know. Either way, I don’t think they knew what he was about to do. “This is it! Do with it whatever you want.” And if that is the case, this is the faithful response that any church or Christian can make. “Here it is, all of it, do with it what you will.”

* And then I think he shocked them.
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He took it! He looked beyond the deserted place. He looked beyond the late hour. He looked beyond the fatigued Church. He looked beyond the meager resources. He looked somewhere else. He looked to heaven and he called on something that the world so desperately needs, the power and the presence of the God who created us. Without that, we are all left in a deserted place with no resources. End of story.

* But, it’s not the end of the story.
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Why give the multiplied food back to the 12 disciples? Do you know how long it would take for 12 disciples to distribute that food to over 15,000 people? That is totally inefficient! If I had the power to multiply loaves and fishes, why not just float the food out to everybody to impress them that I really am the Messiah! But Christ chose to use the Church, as if to say,
‘You put your hands on it. You participate with me in God’s work in the world!’

And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. (6:42-43)

How coincidental. There were twelve baskets of leftovers and twelve disciples. When the Church gives itself away in service to Christ, it ends up with more than it ever had when it started. Jesus made thirteen, so someone had to serve him out of their basket. What a privilege!

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Out of their fatigue and a bad plan, with a sprinkle of sarcasm, and only five loaves and two fish, God does something they could not do. It’s not even about Jesus’ ability to perform a miracle. It’s about knowing who we are, knowing who he is, and knowing what he calls us to do and be.

The demands will always far outweigh our resources. The odds will always be stacked against the Church. Any plans we might have will probably not be good enough. I think God is going to call on us, not out of our abundance, but out of our scarcity, to be a real church in this world of need.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: Amen