

Food for the Journey

Text: Matthew 14:13-21

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6/7/20

An English teacher and her class were studying well known proverbs. One day she gave them a test to see how well they understood what she taught. She stated the first half of the proverb and then asked the students to finish the rest of it. These were some of the answers that the teacher got from her students on that quiz:

It's always darkest before ... Daylight Savings Time.

Never underestimate the power of ... termites.

Don't bite the hand that ... looks dirty.

If you lie down with dogs, you'll ... stink in the morning.

A penny saved is ... not much.

Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and ... you have to blow your nose.

If at first, you don't succeed ... get new batteries.

Even though the students in that class had studied those proverbs for several days, they still had trouble with the right answers. It seems that watching, observing and learning about something don't always give you the right answers.

In our scripture passage this morning, it seems that was true for Jesus' disciples. They had been with Jesus for quite some time at this point, and they still had trouble getting their answer right.

Just from the Gospel of Matthew alone, we know that the disciples had already seen Jesus heal a man with leprosy (Matt. 8:1), heal the servant of a Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5), heal the apostle Peter's mother-in-law from a sickness with a high fever (Matt. 8:14), heal people with various diseases, heal paralyzed people, (Matt. 4), and Jesus even raised a young girl from the dead (Matt. 9:25). Now all of them were in a deserted place with a huge crowd of people who had followed Jesus. The Bible says Jesus "had compassion on them (the crowd) and healed their sick" (vs. 14). So, the disciples had watched Jesus perform a lot of miracles in the past, and he was even healing people that very day. They had seen his power up close and personal. They forgot all of that and went back to the mundane of life. It's now late in the day, they're on a hill out in the middle of nowhere, and all they could think about was how tired they were and that they've got a bunch of hungry people on their hands.

If nothing else, the disciples were practical men. It was late in the day. They probably had two concerns: one was for Jesus. They knew he was hoping to get away for a while after the bad news about John the Baptist being killed. Now, he had been with the crowd for the better part of the day and was probably exhausted. And since it was late in the afternoon, they know all these people would be getting hungry. There were 5000 men, not counting the women and children, who all have growling stomachs. The nearest McDonald's is about 20 centuries away! In the disciples' minds, it was time to wrap it up and send the people away. After all, they wanted to relax, and their own stomachs were probably growling. They figured the crowd could scrounge up dinner in the nearby towns.

So, they said to Jesus, “Send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves” (vs. 15). But Jesus swiftly dismissed this idea. He said, “They don’t need to go away. YOU give them something to eat” (vs. 16).

Can you feel the disciples’ brains clicking away? “Excuse me, Jesus. WE should give them dinner?” Where are the energy and the food supposed to come from? The disciples were dumbfounded. They do the math and realize they have no money. Surely Jesus didn’t expect them to pay to feed so great a multitude. What could they possibly do?

They start by looking at their own resources. Their own food supply is pretty meager, just five loaves and two fish, which basically amounted to “nothing” in the face of such a huge crowd.

But you see, that was OK. Jesus wanted them to do the impossible—the kind of miracle that is only possible by the power of God. Jesus was right there with them. The disciples were thinking too small. They were thinking in human terms, very aware of their limitations. As they calculated the cost of such a feast, they neglected to factor in one critical figure—Jesus. Didn’t the presence of the very Son of God open up whole new possibilities? Was it not possible that with Jesus’ help they could do something truly amazing?

The disciples are thinking scarcity ... Jesus is thinking abundance. The disciples think they are unable to do anything. Jesus says, “With me you can do everything. Don’t tell me what you don’t have. Let me show you what we can do together.”

So, Jesus ignored the disciples’ objections. He said, “Bring the bread and fish here to me.” When he received them, he had the people sit down on the grass, the scripture tells us “He looked up to heaven”—where all our good gifts come from—“and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples” (vv. 18-19a). Seems rather like a communion there on the hillside.

Then the disciples handed it out to the crowd. “And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full” (v. 20). Someone once said, what was left over was twelve lunchboxes, just enough for each one of the disciples to personally experience what could be achieved with Jesus’ help.

Up to this point, they had pretty much been on the observing end of things while Jesus did miracles for others. On this day, they themselves were recipients of one of Jesus’ miracles.

It might be easy here to be upset with the disciples and their “unfaith.” But if you notice, Jesus never chastised them in this passage. He did in other stories, but he didn’t do that here. I think Jesus just saw it as a beautiful teaching moment for his disciples.

And I don’t think we should judge the disciples too harshly either. We need to remember that we also see the power of God and still fail to imagine the possibilities. We miss opportunities to serve, we miss opportunities to lose our fears, we miss opportunities to reach out in life and grow, because we rely too heavily on our own strength and capabilities. We look around us and see what we don’t have, instead of what Jesus can supply. We miss out because we too often lack the faith to ask for a miracle.

The fact is, we can’t do it alone. But just as surely as Jesus was right there on the hill with his disciples that day, he is right alongside us, every minute of every day. We may feel weak, and battered, and used up, and tired, and not up to our challenges. But if we’re willing to place our lives in the hands of the Master, everything is possible.

This morning, in the Lord’s Supper, we’re reminded again that with God nothing is impossible. Nothing can defeat us. Nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus. If we’re feeling weak from events of the past months, and especially this past week, this is food for the journey to strengthen us for any challenge we may face.