

It is the only thing that is told in all four gospels. Not the birth, not even the crucifixion, The feeding of the five thousand. This story is so important that each of the gospel writers felt it must be included in their writing.

If you look at the four, they are remarkably similar, which is unusual when things appear in multiple Gospels. Not only is a large crowd fed with a small amount of food, but it happens in a similar way as well.

Each telling of this story starts with trying to get away. In Matthew, Jesus has just learned of the beheading of John the Baptist. In Mark, he is trying to get the disciples away from the crowds that had mobbed them. Luke is a combination of the two, the disciples are out doing their work and learn of the Beheading of John and tell Jesus. And in John, he has just finished being interrogated in the temple for healing someone on the Sabbath and takes the disciples away to rest.

He and the disciples are, in each case, physically and emotionally tired. They have been doing God's work among God's people and need a break. We've all been there. We've all needed a break from working or from negotiating the emotional trauma of the death of someone we love. In those times we have no more to give.

All Jesus and the disciples want is to rest. But that's not going to happen. The people follow. In John it even says they cross the Sea of Tiberias, that's the Roman name for the Sea of Galilee. That is like Jesus being on the south shore of Oneida Lake and crossing to the north shore, they are about the same width. And the people followed. Not in a boat, they walked around! Jesus might have been done, but not the people. There was still healing, preaching, and loving that must be done.

Then the day finally ends and the disciples think everyone will leave to get food finally giving them the peace they've been seeking. John even tells Jesus he should make the crowd leave, it is dinner time.

This is part one of the lesson. After a full day of doing God's work Jesus says "no, you feed them" I have often felt what must have been John's reaction. "Excuse me????? We barely have enough for ourselves and you think I'm going to feed that. And besides, if we did, I'm TIRED!!!!!! I've used all my nice voice for the day."

Part one of the lesson of this moment is that we don't get to choose when God uses us to help others. God doesn't have a sign up sheet or online portal for volunteer slots. God uses us to serve God's needs on God's time and schedule. With that truth, we can all identify with one of the disciples.

All too often people have needed something and I helped, begrudgingly. I might have been smiling on the outside, but inside I was not. I was bitter and annoyed and wondering why I got called. They had other friends and family, I knew it. But instead, I'm helping them move. I'm giving them a ride. I'm listening to their heartache. Because when they needed God to provide, I was the vessel that was chosen.

Being a disciple in the feeding of the five thousand is not really the character you want to play very often. And sometimes we "turn down that role" when maybe we shouldn't. Sometimes we are so tired that we get told to feed them and look Jesus stone cold in the face and say no. We've all done it, it is an equal confession and condemnation.

At that moment comes the most amazing part of grace. Because in the moment where we refuse to play the role of the disciple, God through infinite grace recasts us from feeder to one being fed. Suddenly we become not the vessel pouring, but the vessel receiving.

Jesus realizes that while he is fully God and fully human, we are only human and can only act like that. Jesus knows that our petulance needs as much grace as the next sinner. And it is offered.

Makes you feel like dirt when you think about it. In our desire to think only of ourselves, Jesus can only think of us as well. So when we sit and join the crowd that needs feeding, Jesus feeds us from the plenty that is God's grace.

When we think of the people that followed Jesus, we often have an image of people from renaissance paintings, with haloes. But instead, we should get an image from a mirror. The disciples weren't perfect people. They were just people, like you and me. Called by God to a task which they didn't always do willingly or happily.

Each of us needs that refreshing grace. It comes in many ways but it always comes when God knows we need it the most.

As we all continue to wrestle with the world we find ourselves tired. I don't want to give love to people who refuse to help control the virus. I don't want to give love to people of the opposite political view. I don't want to give love to the people that I've been STUCK INSIDE WITH for the last 5 months.

We can be petulant children of God, but the Son of God is not. The Son of God looks at us as he looked at the 5,000 and looked at the rich man who refused to sell everything. He looks at us, and loves us with a love that can fill us to overflowing so that we can offer it to others once more.

We have developed a thought that love and forgiveness are a fixed amount. From a human perspective they usually are. But from God's perspective there is always plenty and there is always someone in need. God's work, our hands. Let us trust in that.

Amen