

Sandra Stogsdill Brown

More Pies

A stewardship sermon on Mark 6:30-44

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Before our scripture reading, some background. Jesus has sent the twelve disciples out, two by two, on a mission. He wouldn't let them take any food, or any money, or even an extra garment. But he did give them authority over unclean spirits, so they went out and preached and cast out demons and anointed sick people with oil and cured a bunch of them. They were so successful that even King Herod heard about it and started wondering if John the Baptist, whom he had recently had beheaded, had come back to life. Now, the disciples have come back. Let us listen for God's word to us . . .

This story reminds me of two places that I visited on my recent trip to Israel and Jordan. The first is the area around the Sea of Galilee, where this story takes place, and specifically, a little place called Tabgha, on the northwest shore of the sea. There is a church there, now run by the Benedictines, built over the site where Jesus is believed to have performed this miracle, and there is a mosaic of loaves and fishes on the floor dating all the way back to the 4th century. At the front of the church is a rock where Jesus is believed to have stood as he blessed and broke the bread, and there is an altar built over this rock. I don't know how it was decided that this was the rock, but who knows. Maybe somebody who witnessed Jesus blessing the bread on that day remembered that rock, and told people, and brought his family there to see it, and maybe the kids grew up and brought their families to see it, and so on and so forth.

I'll tell you more when I give a presentation on my trip in a couple weeks, but suffice it to say that the Sea of Galilee is beautiful, very sparkling and serene when I saw it. But also, the Sea of Galilee has a very simple shape—like a pear or a violin—and that means you can look out

across the Sea, and see what's going on. It's the exact opposite of the Lake of the Ozarks. Everybody could easily see where Jesus and his disciples were going—no privacy out there. [The land around the sea is very rocky right by the water, and very hilly almost everywhere else—so hats off to these crowds of people who somehow managed to scramble to this place before Jesus and his disciples did.]

Remember that the disciples have just returned from their missionary journey, and now they're so busy they can't even eat. Can you remember a time when you were so busy that you couldn't even eat? Maybe when you were a new parent, trying to snatch some sleep between feedings and diaper changes, or on the job, trying to meet a deadline? These disciples are so depleted that Jesus is concerned, and wants to get them away from it all for a while.

That's the state they're in when Jesus becomes so moved by the need of this enormous crowd that he changes his plans and begins to teach them. And he's on a roll—he keeps talking, and the crowd keeps listening. The disciples are watching the sun get lower in the sky, probably tired of having so many people around when this was supposed to be their alone time with their teacher. They point out to Jesus, hey, it's dinner time. There's no McDonald's out here, no Dillon's, no food trucks. [I have to wonder, are the disciples really worried about the people in the crowd, or are they just ready for this long, tiring day to be over?]

Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." He says THAT. To his disciples who are running on fumes at this point. And they say, Jesus, we can't. We don't have enough. We don't have what it takes to feed all these people.

Now let's stop and think for a minute about 5,000 people. You would have to fill up every seat in the sanctuary more than five times to get 5,000 people. And remember 5,000 was just the men. We don't know how many women and children may have come with them.

Jesus says, I'm not interested in what you don't have. I'm interested in what you HAVE. What do you HAVE? Go and see.

This is ridiculous, because they had all rowed over there in the same boat together. And by the way, those ancient rowboats and fishing boats were not that big, so even if every square inch of that boat had been crammed with food, it wouldn't have been enough, but still, Jesus makes them take an inventory. What do you actually HAVE? [Guys, I know you're tired, but focus on what you have, not what you don't have.]

We HAVE five loaves and two fish (what would MY tone of voice be, answering this question??).

All right then. Have everybody sit down on the grass, and put them in groups of fifties and hundreds so that they'll have to sit with people they don't know, plus it will be easier to serve them that way.

At this point in the story I remember another place I saw on my travels last month, and this time it's Petra, the ancient city of the Naboteans in Jordan. This is a city that is built into the rocks, and it's incredibly elaborate and goes on for miles, but the most common view we associate with Petra is the view of the Treasury, because that is what was used as the entrance to the temple in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, and you know the story I'm going to tell now because I've told it before, that scene when Indiana is trying to find the Holy Grail in order to save his father, and he has to make it through three different challenges, and the last one is the leap of faith, where he's standing in the doorway to a huge cavern, with a drop off into a rocky chasm hundreds of feet below, and no way to get across to the other side. He says, "That's impossible!" In a cold sweat, he steps out into what looks like thin air, only to find that there was

a bridge all along, cleverly painted to blend in to the rocky depths below. He had to step out first, and then he finds his footing.

This story comes to mind because I wonder what it felt like to be a disciple, a tired, depleted disciple, watching Jesus standing there in front of that massive crowd, giving thanks for less than a grocery bag's worth of food. Now, the disciples had surely begun to build up their trust muscles by healing and casting out demons on their recent mission trip, but still. What was it like to be handed part of a loaf and be told, "All right, Philip, start with that group over there." It's a pattern we see over and over in scripture: step out in faith. Then see what God does.

Think about Jesus in the Gospel of John, who instructs the servants at the wedding at Cana to fill those huge stone jars with water, and then draw some out and take it to the chief steward. And it's so good that the chief steward is thrown off by how the host is apparently serving the good stuff last, instead of first, while the guests are sober enough to appreciate it. Or Elijah, during the famine back in the days of the kings, saying to a starving widow, yes, I can see that you have barely a cup of flour left, but first bake me some bread, and then make something for yourself and your son, and she does, and the flour and the oil never runs out, not for years, until the famine is over. [Or God saying to the Israelites back when they were slaves in Egypt.]

The lesson is that when God asks us to do something, God always provides more than we need to do it. God provides the strength. God provides the energy. God provides the ability. God provides the material resources.

I wholeheartedly believe that this miracle could have happened in a supernatural way, by Jesus physically transforming five loaves and two fish into that much food. But I also like the suggestion by some preachers that this miracle may have happened by people seeing what the disciples were doing and being inspired to share what they had brought with them, because I

have a hard time believing that anybody would just take off for the day without packing a lunch. And to share it with people they didn't know.

The message is the same regardless: God COMES THROUGH. God will not ask us to do something and leave us hanging. But it seems like we almost always have to take that step of faith before we see God's provision.

One of the things that God asks us to do is to tithe. To return to God ten percent of the wealth that God entrusts to our care. For a lot of us, this sounds terrifying and impossible. It's one thing to talk about stepping out in faith, but when it comes to money, we're afraid we're going to be Charlie Brown, running to kick that football, and what if God turns out to be like Lucy, who always snatches the football away at the last minute, and we end up flat on our backs, and humiliated?

We'll be talking for the next two Sundays about generosity, and we'll start with the effect that generosity has on those who give. As it turns out, a lot. Remember that generosity is about proportion, not total amounts. God never asks us to give what we don't have, only what we have.

My husband Rod likes to talk about pie. That might work better, if you're not a bread and fish kind of person. We think we've been given one pie, and our job is to protect that pie and cut it up carefully, and manage our hunger so that it fits that pie. That's how I tend to operate, much of the time. God, show me how to make this pie last. Help me to be content with my pie. Because this pie is all that I can see right now.

As Rod often reminds me, sometimes it's about making more pie. God is a God of more pies. And what we've learned over the years is the more we share our pie, even when it feels like there's barely enough for us, the more pie we seem to have. It's almost like a law of nature,

it's that consistent. It doesn't mean we mindlessly gorge ourselves on pie without a care in the world. But we learn to trust that even as we take that last piece and share it, there's a new pie in the oven somewhere, and it will be ready in God's good time.

What I want each of you to hear today, what I think we really need to soak in before we can hear anything else, is the good news that YOU are enough. Right now, today. However tired you are, however broke or broken you are, however worried or disconnected or discouraged you are . . . you are enough, and you have enough. God is in the kitchen, making more pie. Know that whatever God calls us to do today, whatever God calls this church to do in the coming year, God will give us everything we need, and then some, to do it.