

**“Five Loaves & Two Fish”**  
**Mark 6:30-44**  
**February 18, 2024**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark, as we come to Mark 6:30-44.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

<sup>6:30</sup> The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. <sup>32</sup> And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. <sup>33</sup> Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. <sup>34</sup> When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. <sup>35</sup> And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. <sup>36</sup> Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” <sup>37</sup> But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” <sup>38</sup> And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” <sup>39</sup> Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. <sup>40</sup> So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. <sup>41</sup> And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. <sup>42</sup> And they all ate and were satisfied. <sup>43</sup> And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. <sup>44</sup> And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

**Prayer of Illumination**

Lord, you have dealt well with us,  
just as you have promised in your word.  
Teach us now good judgment and knowledge,  
for we believe in your word to us – your commandments and your testimonies.  
You are good and you do good,  
teach us your ways.

We know that your word to us in the Scriptures is of more value for us than thousands of pieces of gold and silver.  
Help us now to treat it and attend to it as such.  
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:65, 66, 68, 72]

## **Introduction**

Our story this morning is Jesus's miraculous feeding of the five thousand.

And as we come to it, a couple comments up front are in order. First of all, this is, providentially, our third sermon in a row (counting last Sunday's morning and evening sermons) related to how we are to handle our limitations as human beings. So just to be clear, this was not intentional – it's not the result of a decision to emphasize these points right now and it's not a cry for help from the pastors. It's just how the texts lined up.

Second, the themes of this specific text may feel a bit familiar to some of you as well. The four Gospels include stories of many different miracles that Jesus performed. But this miracle – the feeding of the five thousand – is the only miracle from the public ministry of Jesus (besides his resurrection) that is narrated in all four Gospels. [Brown, 236; Morris, 338]

For one thing, that means we considered this story a few years back, when we were working through the Gospel of John together. But, for another thing, it means that a repetition of the theme of this text must not be such a bad thing, since the Holy Spirit chose to repeat himself four times in retelling this story to us. He seems to want us to go over it more than once.

All four Gospel writers felt this story was essential for God's people to consider – that it had something important to teach us, as the people of God.

And as we consider it, what we see here is that in this story, Jesus gives his disciples:

- a need they can't handle,

and then calls them to:

- offer their meager resources, and
- trust his divine power,
- in order to bring about fruit that they could have never produced on their own.

So we see: need, offerings, trust, and fruit.

## **Need**

First, there is the need Jesus calls his disciples to address.

And the first five verses set the context for this. Jesus and the disciples seek to get away, to rest together, as we discussed last Lord's Day. The crowds follow them, and Jesus then responds by ministering to the crowds – by teaching them many things.

After that, it's getting towards the end of the day, and the people have no provisions with them. The disciples come to Jesus and urge him to send the crowds away so they can get food for themselves.

And at that point, Jesus turns to them, in verse thirty-seven, and says to them: "You give them something to eat."

I think this is one of those moments where we can feel some sympathy for the disciples. Remember they had been out, working hard, preaching in the villages, about Jesus, in the days leading up to this. Then they returned, and by Jesus's own assessment, they now needed some time of rest. That time did not go quite as they had hoped, as Jesus was pulled away from them to teach the crowds. But it seems they themselves might have still gotten some time to rest and recover. And now they come to Jesus, and they expect him to finally send the crowds away so he can spend some time with them ... and instead, Jesus hands them what seems to be an impossible task. They come to talk to him, and suddenly they're in over their heads.

But Jesus doesn't do this out of cruelty. He doesn't do it out of callousness. He does it because he has a lesson to teach them. An important lesson that all four Gospel writers felt we needed to learn as well.

So Jesus turns to them and says, "You give them something to eat."

And to appreciate the size of this need that Jesus has just laid on their shoulders, we should appreciate how large this crowd really was. We traditionally refer to this as the feeding of the five thousand, but it was probably the feeding of many more than that. We're told in verse ten that there were five thousand men, and Matthew, in his account specifies that that number did not include the women and children who were also present. Commentators suggest that, depending on the ratio of men to women and children, there could have been anywhere from six thousand to twenty thousand people gathered before Jesus and the disciples that day. [Carson, 270]

And in case we're still unclear, the question of the disciples clarifies the impossibility of this task: Not only would it be hard to find all that bread in "a desolate place," even if they were surrounded by shops and bakeries, the funds needed to buy that much bread were substantial. It would take 200 denarii – about 8 months wages – to buy enough bread for the crowd gathered there. That's the point they make in verse thirty-seven.

Jesus calls them to do in a moment something that, in the best-case scenario, it would take one of them eight months to do. Even all twelve of them would need to work full-time for almost three weeks straight to gather enough money to feed this crowd. But they don't have three weeks – they have just that evening. And there's nowhere obvious to get the bread, even if they had all that money.

Jesus gives the twelve the responsibility to feed the crowds – to meet this need ... but the need is clearly more than they can handle.

And we may feel the same way sometimes.

Maybe you feel that way right now in your family. Maybe it's a difficult marriage, or struggles with your children, or struggles with a parent ... and you feel like you have this responsibility – this calling, to care for and interact with them in a certain way ... but the more you consider the situation, the more the need before you feels like it's just more than you yourself can meet. And you feel overwhelmed. And you don't know what to do. Maybe as you look at that need in your family, you feel a bit like how the Twelve must have felt when they saw the size of the crowd and Jesus said to them “You give them what they need.”

Or maybe you're trying to minister to someone in some other setting – whether coming alongside another Christian, or reaching out to a non-Christian, or in some formal role of service or ministry, and as the need before you comes more and more into focus, you feel overwhelmed by it, and like it's far more than you could meet yourself. But they are looking to you for help.

Or maybe for you it's some other calling the Lord has placed in your life, and as the need before you becomes more clear, you more and more feel like you're not able to handle it – that the need is just beyond you.

There's this common phrase I've sometimes heard Christians say to those who are struggling or suffering or feeling overwhelmed. One person will share that they feel like they're dealing with something that is beyond their capacity. And the other person will maybe place a hand on their shoulder, and then, in a reassuring tone, say something like: “Well, remember: God will never give you more than you can handle.”

And verse thirty-seven is as an important reminder that that claim – the claim that God will never give us more than we can handle – is nonsense.

The person who says it may mean well – they might have the best of intentions. But that doesn't make them any less wrong.

Because right here, in verse thirty-seven, Jesus clearly gives the disciples more than they can handle. Jesus asks them to do something in an afternoon that they know would take eight months for any of them to do individually, and at least three weeks even if they all worked together. But Jesus has effectively asked them to do it right there, on the spot, that afternoon. It's simply more than they can handle.

The idea that God won't give us more than we can handle seems to grow from a misreading of First Corinthians 10:13, which says “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” The Apostle Paul's point in that verse is that God will never allow a situation where we can say that we had to sin because the temptation was too much for us – God will always give us a way to escape temptation.

But that verse is not promising that God will only give us the kinds of tasks or callings that we are able to handle ourselves in this life. In fact, the same Apostle Paul, who wrote First Corinthians 10:13 tells us that that was not true in his own life.

In Second Corinthians 1:8 Paul writes: “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”

“We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”

I don’t know about you, but it sure sounds to me like the Apostle Paul is telling us that God gave them more than they could handle themselves.

Paul tells the church in Corinth how God gave him more than he could handle. But he doesn’t stop there. He goes on to say in the next verse that that situation – that situation which felt to them like a death sentence – he says that God did that to them “to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”

That’s an encouraging line. It’s reassuring. But what does it really mean?

Well, let’s return to our text to see.

So the first thing we see, in verse thirty-seven, is that Jesus calls on the Twelve to address a need that is more than they themselves can handle.

## **Offering**

The second thing we see is that Jesus calls on the Twelve to offer their meager resources to him.

After giving them this task beyond their capacity, Jesus doesn’t leave them to themselves to figure out what to do next. He guides them.

And we see that in verse thirty-eight. There he says to them “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And he has them gather what they have, and give it to him. And they hand him five loaves and two fish.

Jesus calls them to offer the meager resources they do have to him.

And we should be clear that these resources were meager. Five loaves and two fish doesn’t sound like much for over five thousand people ... but it’s actually even worse than we tend to imagine. We learn in John’s gospel that, more specifically, what the disciples had was five barley loaves, and the context tells us that there was probably not much to the fish either.

In terms of the quality of these resources: wheat bread was actually more common than barley loaves in Jesus’s day ... but barley loaves were cheaper and used by the poor. The two fish were probably preserved fish, and meant to be something of a small tidbit to make the coarse barley bread more palatable.

And then, in terms of the quantity of the resources: the loaves themselves were likely quite small. Luke 11:5 seems to indicate that three such “loaves” were considered a meal for one person. [Brown, 233; Morris, 344; Carson, 270]

So what the disciples have to offer here is a poor meal that would probably be considered a bit light for two people.

These are the meager resources they have.

But Jesus calls on them to offer those resources to him.

We'll get to what Jesus does with those resources, but first we should pause and reflect on this first step for the disciples that Jesus calls them to, when they see a massive gap between the need before them, and the resources they have.

One commentator puts it like this – he writes: “The point is obvious, but we perhaps need to be reminded of it: so often we ourselves have no idea what to do, but the starting-point is always to bring what is there to the attention of Jesus. You can never tell what he’s going to do with it – though part of Christian faith is the expectation that he will do something we hadn’t thought of, something new and creative.” [Wright, *John*, 73]

The disciples see the scarcity of their resources. But Jesus starts by calling on them to bring what meager resources they have to him.

And we are often called to do the same thing. We can tend to think of the world in a mechanistic way, like a closed system: when there is a need before us, we input our resources and efforts, and depending on the quality of our inputs, we get good results, or bad results. And the Bible tells us that God does ordinarily use our resources and our efforts. But it also emphasizes that while we may plant seeds, and we may water them, it is God who gives growth – God who produces fruit from our work. And if that is true – if the results are so much in his hands – if we really believe in his sovereignty and his power ... then our first step should be to prayerfully offer the meager resources we have to him ... to see what he might do with them.

When you face challenging circumstances .... do you think in those terms? Do you turn to God in prayer and offer your resources to him? Or do you tend to ignore his role in things ... and focus on addressing the need yourself?

Jesus here gives the disciples more than they can handle – he gives them an impossible task. But then, to start, he calls on them, to offer him the meager resources they do have.

That’s the second thing we see here.

## **Trusting**

Third, Jesus calls them to place their trust in him. And this plays out in verses thirty-nine and forty.

It’s a little less clear here in Mark, but in John’s account of this miracle it’s made clear that Jesus didn’t tell the crowd to sit down in groups himself – he told the Twelve to have them sit down in groups.

Think of the Apostles for a moment – put yourself in their shoes. Jesus tells you you need to feed five thousand men – probably six to twenty thousand people altogether. He asks what you’ve got, and you bring him a meal that wouldn’t even be satisfying for two people. And then he tells you to organize the people, and direct them to sit down in groups in preparation to receive a meal. But you, at that point, still don’t know where that meal is coming from.

And yet ... the disciples go out, and organize the people to sit, giving them the expectation of a meal. It’s like a restaurant realizing they have no food in the kitchen, but still deciding to seat five thousand new diners anyway. And in this case, you don’t really know what this crowd will do to you, if they get upset with a big disappointment after such raised expectations. But even so ... the disciples do it.

That simple act of obedience displayed real and sincere faith on their part – trust that Jesus was going to do something extraordinary.

John Calvin points out that the disciples should have had even greater confidence than we see here, in Jesus’s ability to provide. But at the same time, Calvin tells us that we must appreciate what faith it did take for the disciples to organize the crowd like this. “No small praise is due,” he writes, “to their cheerful obedience in now complying with this injunction [to make the people sit down], though they know not what is [Christ’s] intention or what advantage they will derive from what they are doing. [...] And this,” Calvin goes on, “is the trial of true faith, when God commands men to walk, as it were, in darkness. For this purpose let us learn not to be wise in ourselves, but, amidst great confusion, still to hope for a prosperous issue, when we follow the guidance of God, who never disappoints his own people.” [Calvin, 230]

I don’t know what went through the Apostles minds as they prepared the people for this meal. But I suspect that what Jesus wanted them to reflect on had to do with who Jesus really is – that his power is not just human power ... that it’s not even just angelic power ... but that it’s divine power.

Jesus has been showing himself to be divine – to be God the Son. And as such, this task of multiplying bread ... something so impossible for human beings ... is an ordinary task for God ... because he’s done countless times before.

Augustine makes this point in his sermon on this miracle. He points out that every year, God feeds the whole world by multiplying just a few grains. Every year, humans take a few grains and bury them in the ground, and nature scatters seed over the earth, and every year God takes that grain, and he takes that seed, and he multiplies it into a harvest. Multiplying food for his creatures is just another day’s work for God. And Jesus is God.

And so, just as he ordinarily did with each year’s crops, so too, Augustine writes, “did he multiply the five loaves in his hands. For there was power in the hands of Christ. Those five loaves were seeds of a kind, not indeed committed to the earth but seeds which were multiplied by the one who made the earth.” [Augustine, 24.1; p.423]

The Twelve were called on to remember who Jesus was, and to trust in his divine power. They were to remember that what was impossible for man, was just another routine action for God.

And that's something we need to remember as well. We have many limits. But God does not. And however big the need is before us, God is always able to address it. It's never a question of power. He made the universe from nothing. Surely he can handle the needs we face.

Whatever they might have thought, in that moment, the Twelve acted in faith – trusting Jesus when he called them to have the people sit in expectation of a meal.

## **Fruit**

And then, fourth and finally, we see the fruit that Jesus brought about. We read, starting in verse forty-one: “And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.”

Jesus met the need of the people. Jesus met the need, with more than enough left over. In the end, “they all ate and were satisfied” and there were twelve baskets “full” of bread and fish left over.

Jesus, in this passage, sets a need before his disciples that is more than they can handle, in order that he might provide through them what they could never produce on their own.

One theologian puts it like this – he says that the disciples “need[ed] to rely on God as much for their giving as for their receiving. This,” he writes, “is a lesson for every Christian: Jesus provides for our needs, but He also provides us with the resources to meet other people’s needs.” [Leithart, *The Four*, 197]

Or as the Apostle Paul would put it: “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” [2 Corinthians 4:7]

And surpassing power is indeed what was displayed here, because after thousands were fed with a meal that had begun as something that was barely enough for two – after thousands had eaten their fill, twelve additional baskets were filled with the leftovers – a symbolic picture of how Jesus could have fed more ... in fact, Jesus was prepared to feed all twelve tribes of Israel, should they come to him. [Carson, 271]

Our text this morning, is a picture of the spiritual reality of how God works in the lives of his people: He often sets a need before his people that is more than they can handle, in order that he might provide through them what they could never produce on their own, as they trust him, and offer him their meager resources.

That's what we see here.

## **Application**

And it's an important lesson for every one of us to consider.

I know it's a lesson that I need to remember.

Brothers and sisters, if Mark 6:30-44 is not a picture of how Christ works through his people – if it's not a picture of the spiritual reality of what Jesus does in our lives today, then I need to quit my job immediately.

And that's not me being overly dramatic. It's not false humility. To be honest, it's not real humility either. It's just cold, hard realism.

There are people in this church – many people, in fact, who have been adult believers for longer than I have been alive. There are godly men and women who have been following Jesus faithfully for two, or three times longer than I have. There's an elder at this church who I think has been an elder since I was three. Our previous pastor, who still worships here, I'm pretty sure has spent more days in ordained pastoral ministry than I have spent on earth.

What can I give to such Christians and such a congregation on a Sunday morning? What can I possibly produce in one week to feed them? Eight months of my feeble labors would surely not be enough to produce something that could even begin to reach some of their levels. What do I have to offer?

Well ... in a sense, I have five small loaves, and two small fish, and faith that Jesus Christ, by his power, can turn that into something that will fill his people.

Then, there are people in this congregation who are struggling. They are in pain. They have (or someone they love has) sinned or been sinned against, in ways that have had deep effects on their lives. And they need support. They need spiritual care. And what do I as their pastor, have to give them? What can I possibly produce that would heal their pain? Eight months of my feeble labors would not be enough to begin to meet the needs of their souls. What do I have to offer?

Well ... I've got five small loaves, and two small fish, and faith that Jesus Christ, by his power, can turn that into something that will fill his people.

I could go on.

But what I want you to see is that the spiritual reality that this miracle is pointing us to has real significance for me and for you today.

First, it means that we must give up on relying on our own innate abilities to do whatever work God has called us to do. If you are doing the work of ministry that Christ has called you to in some area of life – whether it's among friends or family, in a formal or informal role – your own resources will only last so long. And when you reach their end – when you realize that you're no longer cut out for the work, that you're facing more than you can handle in yourself, our text tells you that then you must stop trusting in yourself, and must turn instead to Jesus, and offer him your five small loaves and two small fish, trusting in his power.

Second, it means that in that difficult situations where the Lord has called you to serve someone ... and you feel like it is beyond what you can handle in yourself ... you can have hope that the Lord can work through you anyway.

Whether it's someone you're trying to care for in your family, or in the church, or out in the world, you might be feeling your lack. You might see the lack of resources you have in yourself. You might even be saying to Jesus: "Jesus, please, send them away to someone else who can provide for them." And maybe the Lord will call them to receive help from someone else.

But he also might turn to you and say "No ... you care for them." And when you try to explain why you don't have what it takes, he might ask "Well, what do you have to offer them? What ability do you have to minister to them? Go and see."

And in that moment, you don't need to despair. You simply need to bring your five small loaves and two small fish to Jesus, to offer them to him, and then see what he will do.

And part of that process may often mean involving other people. After all, Jesus didn't use just one person to feed the five thousand – he used twelve. And others beyond the Twelve also contributed to the process [John 6:9]. So none of this means that we should handle things just us and Jesus. Jesus may work through just us. But he also often works through several of us at once – through the community of his people. And in that setting, he often produces fruit far beyond the sum of their contributions. That's what we so clearly see here in our text.

Because even with our best efforts, even with our joint efforts, we may at the end of the day, find ourselves, in some way, standing before five thousand hungry people with just five small loaves and two small fish ... and so if we're not bringing our gifts to Christ, in faith that by his power he can fill the spiritual needs before us, then we will either proceed under a delusion about our own abilities, or we will collapse in despair.

I know that is true for me. Where in life is it true for you?

Where do you need to be renewed and encouraged in the work God has called you to?

Or where has God called you to serve or to minister to someone ... but you have been avoiding and resisting it ... because you're convinced that he cannot use you, with your meager loaves and fish?

Maybe when you look at what you're called to do – when you look at the need – you want to say "Lord, eight months of effort would not even be enough for me to do what you are asking of me for this person today." And when you feel that way, the question is not whether you are enough or where you can get your hands on two hundred denarii. The question is: Will you, like the disciples, both acknowledge the gap between your own resources and the need before you ... and then also, will you still turn to Christ and offer him your five small loaves and two small fish, and trust that he, by his power, can use them to fill the spiritual need before you – the need that you could never fill on your own?

Because that is what he may be calling you to.

## **Conclusion**

We serve a God who gives us more than we can handle. And when he does, he calls on us to take our meager resources and offer them up to him, that he might use them to do what we never could do on our own.

And if we know Christ ... and if we know the gospel ... then this should not surprise us.

Because this is the story of our entire spiritual lives.

We have each, every believing Christian here, come to where we are not by amassing great resources on our own ... but by taking our meager faith, and offering it to Christ, and then seeing him transform that tiny faith into everlasting life: into adoption as children of God ... into sanctification and growth in grace ... into the hope of glory. That is the heart of our experience of the gospel. Why should we expect it to be any different as we do the various works of ministry that God has called us to in this world?

It has been the pattern of the beginning of our spiritual lives .... it is the pattern of our spiritual lives today ... and it will be the pattern of our spiritual lives in glory.

Because in the end, we will each stand before the Lord on the last day. And the question will not be whether we were the smartest or the strongest or the most gifted. It won't be how many denarii we had stored up in our pockets when the challenges of life came our way. The question the Lord will consider – the framework he will evaluate our lives by – will be, when those challenges came our way, did we offer up to him whatever we had – did we lift up to him our five small loaves and two small fish – in the hope and trust not that we by our power could make something of it, but in the hope and trust that he by his power could make something of it?

And for those who offered their loaves and fish, trusting not in themselves, but in the Lord who fed five thousand – they are the ones who will hear their Lord say to them “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.” [Matthew 25:23]

Amen.

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*This sermon draws heavily on my September 15, 2019, sermon on John 6:1-14: “More Than You Can Handle.”*

**This sermon draws on material from:**

- Augustine. *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1-40*. Translated by Edmund Hill. Edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald. The Works of Saint Augustine. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009.
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- Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971.
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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.