

Size Matters

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, August 6, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 14:13-21](#)

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I would like to change the world. I would like to broker peace in Israel/Palestine and the Korean Peninsula. I would like to reverse climate change. I would like to end racism and rape culture. I would like to end crime and to heal the brokenness that leads to crime. I would like to feed the hungry multitudes and end hunger. I would like to make healthcare available to everyone without fear of debt. I would like the change the world.

I'm not going to, at least not in a big way, like one of the ways I just listed.

I look at what Jesus accomplished in just, what, 33 years, and I realize how little I've done. Maybe it's not fair to compare myself to Jesus. You know: the whole God thing.

But look at what Martin Luther King, Jr. accomplished in 39 years. Or what William Barber, II is accomplishing – and, yes, he's younger than me. (If you don't know who William Barber is, don't worry. You will. Just keep coming to worship, and by the end of September ...)

Heck, even Barack Obama is younger than me.

The chances are that I will not ever do some great, society-changing, justice-making, peace-creating act or series of acts. So maybe I should just give up.

Jesus fed 5,000 people – well, 5,000 men, plus the women and children who most people thought weren't worth counting. Not so for Jesus. While most folk didn't think women and children counted, Jesus did. He made sure everyone got enough to eat. "All ate and were satisfied," Matthew says.

And Jesus didn't just feed this multitude. He did it with five loaves of bread and two fish. How impressive is that? Impressive enough that the story is told six times in the four gospels. That's right. Two of the gospels repeat the story. And Jesus didn't just walk up to the wall and say, "Tea, Earl Grey, hot." No replicators out there in this deserted place.

It's all pretty crazy. I mean, we all know "that the laws of Newtonian physics aren't suddenly flexible if you just have enough faith. Atoms and molecules don't just shape shift wily nilly. It's more reasonable to believe that things are only what they seem. Water stays water, 5 loaves stay 5 loaves and the dead stay dead."¹

I suppose it's possible that "everybody felt so compelled to be good people after hearing Jesus preach that they all opened up their picnic baskets and gave parts of their fried chicken and potato salad to their neighbors[, and] so *that* ... is why there was enough

¹ Nadia Bolz Weber, "Sermon the Feeding of the 5,000," *Patheos*,
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2015/07/sermon-on-the-feeding-of-the-5000-preached-for-pastors-musicians-and-church-leaders/> (posted 25 July 2015; accessed 1 August 2017).

food to go around.”² Thousands of people sharing with their neighbors is pretty miraculous. And if the only lesson you take home today is, “Be nice and share your juice box,” well, that’s a pretty good lesson. In fact, sharing is a necessary part of God’s economy, so it’s a really good lesson. But maybe there’s something else going on here.

Nadia Bolz Weber asks us to consider “that we [just might] have a God who can actually feed so many on so little. A God who created the universe out of nothing, that can put flesh on dry bones [of] nothing, that can put life in a dry womb of nothing. NOTHING is God’s favorite material to work with. Perhaps God looks upon that which we dismiss as ‘nothing,’ ‘insignificant,’ ‘worthless’ and says, ‘Ha! Now *that* I can do something with.”³

Jesus was working on self-care when the crowd interrupted. News of King Herod’s execution of John the baptizer reached Jesus and he decided to take a break. He decided to go to a deserted place by himself. I imagine he needed it. Preaching and teaching and embodying God’s truth is dangerous business – it was then and it is now. John died for it. And Jesus knew he could be next. So he went to a deserted place by himself.

But taking this personal space doesn’t last. The crowd hears that he’s gone away and they go after him. “Jesus responds with grace and compassion to the crowds that come, healing their sick. As the day draws to a close, the disciples make a pragmatic suggestion: There is no food here, and the people must eat. Send them away to fend for themselves. Jesus’ response is to make the disciples waiters of the Spirit. ...

“The ‘lonely place apart’ in the end does become a place of rest, healing, and nourishment [– but] for the larger group,”⁴ and not so much for Jesus and the disciples. It isn’t until later that Jesus gets his alone time.



Like I said, the disciples’ suggestion that Jesus send the crowd away was pragmatic: There is no food here, and the people must eat. Only it turned out they were wrong. “Maybe the mistake the disciples made wasn’t only that they forgot [that God likes to work with nothing], but also that they forgot that they too were hungry. They defaulted to ‘what do I have’ rather than ‘what do I too need, and is that also what the people in front of me need?’ The disciples seemed to forget that their own personal need for bread, and not their own personal resources was the thing that qualified them to participate in the miracle of feeding thousands with nothing on hand. It was not their cooking skills, it was not their ability to preach enough Law that they guilted

² Ibid.

³ *Ibid*, though I did some grammatical corrections. (Some of her emphases have been changed – bolds, italics, etc.)

⁴ Julie Polter, “Servants of Boundy,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/servants-bounty> (accessed 1 August 2017).

everyone into sharing; it was their own deep hunger which exactly matches that of the crowd. How often do we forget this ourselves?”⁵

I know I forget it. I get so caught up in the hunger I see around me that I think I have to solve it. So I look at what I have at my disposal to feed them, and I keep coming up short. I’m short on compassion, or will, or time, or skill. “And I think of how God called me to this and needs me to feed God’s people and so I lean on my own resources and when I do I quickly see how little there is. A few loaves? A couple fish? It’s never enough.”⁶

Chances are I’m not the only one who’s worry about coming up short, who’s afraid of being found out. “That sense of ourselves comes from the same economy of scarcity that makes us fret over how to stretch bread and fish, our selves, and our love. In the face of such want, and of our own failings and limitations, it seems utterly foolhardy to trust in God’s abundant gifts, laid out before us and coursing through our veins. Yet this is the presumption God commends us to embody. While we run around readying ourselves – accruing the right skills, the right personality, the right spirituality – God is busy calling us as we are now ...”⁷

God doesn’t ask if we can do big things. God asks if we’ll live faithfully. Here’s the thing – and I know this; I just don’t always get this. Even in the midst of that call, God loves me totally apart from any work I do. Even in the midst of that call, God loves you totally apart from any work you do. That’s not to say that the work you do isn’t important to God. It is important. It’s just not necessary for God to love you.

What is necessary – at least I think it’s necessary – is remembering this, especially if the work you’re involved in is important, transformative, kin-dom building work. That’s right. I think that the deeper your work is in building the kin-dom of God, the more you need to know that you are loved by God whether you do that work or not. When Jesus looks out through you and asks, “Where are these hungry people going to get food?” he’s “including you in the category of hungry people and himself in the category of bread.”⁸

“When I rely only on my strengths which, trust me, are few, when I think I have only my small stingy little heart from which to draw love for those I serve, when the waters are rough and storms are real and I am scared – filled with fear of what is happening or not happening in the church, filled with fear that I don’t have what it takes to be a leader in the church, filled with fear that everyone will see nothing in me but my inadequacies, I have forgotten about Jesus – my Jesus who’s making something out of my nothing and walking towards me in the storm. That’s our guy. The Man of sorrows familiar with suffering,

⁵ Weber, op. cit.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kari Jo Verhulst, “Take and Eat,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/take-and-eat> (accessed 1 August 2017).

⁸ Weber, op. cit.

friend of scoundrels and thieves, forgiver of his own executioners, resurrected on the 3rd day, ... the great defeater of death and griller of fish and savior of sinners.”⁹

And that’s why, when it comes to size matters, the size of what you’re doing really isn’t important. What’s important is the size of the love we put into what we’re doing. And when there are days when all you can do today is sit on the ground and let someone pass you the bread and fish, do that. Do that with great love.

Yes, Jesus tells the disciples, “You give them something to eat.” So they do what they can with who they are and what they have – and Jesus makes the magic happen. Amen.

⁹ Ibid.