

## NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 6, 2020

ISAIAH 55:1-5 | PSALM 145: 8-9, 14-21 | ROMANS 9:1-5 | MATTHEW 14:13-

21

The feeding of the five thousand is one of only a few miracles that show up in all four gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John couldn't agree on a lot of things, and they felt very comfortable editing and repurposing each other's stories, but they all agreed that if you wanted to understand what God was doing in Jesus Christ, you needed to understand the feeding of the five thousand.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Because before there's a miracle, there's a bind. There's a problem. Jesus has attracted a massive crowd of people after a day of teaching and healing. But now it's getting late. As the disciples put it, "The hour has passed." And this huge crowd of people is going to need something to eat. And when the disciples look down, all they see is five loaves and two fish. They don't have enough.

The disciples response is, quite understandably, to send everyone away. *We don't have enough. We can't feed everyone with five loaves and two fish. So let them fend for themselves in the marketplaces.* Put the onus back on them. After all, people can take care of themselves. Don't make them your responsibility. When the disciples think they don't have enough, they say *Send the crowds away.*

Last week, the *Washington Post* ran an article about summer's hottest new trend: microschoooling.<sup>1</sup> Microschoooling is one of those ideas that would have made no sense four months ago but somehow seems logical now. Faced with uncertainty about the upcoming school year, parents have started pooling their money together to hire an instructor to teach a small pod of kids at one of their homes. Costs run upwards of a thousand dollars a month per student. Think of it like Uber meets one room school house.

And this makes sense as a strategy for a lot of parents, but it also raises some thorny questions about access and equity. Most of the parents interviewed showed some level of uneasiness when asked if they would send their kids to a microschoool. On the one hand, your kids might learn algebra, but on the other hand it's hard to get a good education if everyone in your school is well off. But one woman's comment was so brazen and lacking in self-awareness that it made you wonder if she realized she was talking to a reporter. She said, "We can pay. We know others can't, and there will be a gap, and that's unfortunate." We can pay. Others can't. There's a gap. That's unfortunate.

That's essentially what the disciples try to tell Jesus. We have food. They don't. There's a gap. That's unfortunate. Send them to the marketplaces to get something for themselves. Send the crowds away.

But when the disciples make that argument to Jesus, Jesus rejects their line of thinking. Jesus says that the crowd has no need to go away. That instead of sending them away to fend for themselves, the disciples will be responsible for them. They can give them something to eat. The disciples believe that they only have enough for themselves, that they can't possibly take on the responsibility of feeding all these people. But Jesus says that they can. The disciples don't have to cut themselves off from everyone else and look out for themselves. They have more to work with than they think they do.

In other words, the miracle is impressive. But the bind, the situation it comes from, is equally instructive. Because we find ourselves in that situation all the time.

It's easy to mock the microschooolers who shrug off social problems with an *It's unfortunate. Let them eat Lunchables.* After all, the pandemic has reminded us how dependent our health and well-being is on other people, and it's a little short-sighted to just think you can go it alone. But the truth is all they're really doing

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Meckler and Hannah Natanson, "For Parents Who Can Afford It, A Solution For Fall: Bring The Teachers To Them," *Washington Post*, July 17, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/fall-remote-private-teacher-pods/2020/07/17/9956ff28-c77f-11ea-8ffe-372be8d82298\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/fall-remote-private-teacher-pods/2020/07/17/9956ff28-c77f-11ea-8ffe-372be8d82298_story.html)

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(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

is saying the quiet part out loud. When we get in situations where we don't think we have enough, our gut reaction is to withdraw from everyone else and look out for ourselves. And funny enough, sometimes that just makes things even worse.

While we've been dealing with the pandemic, a very clear collective action problem, there's another collective action ramping up that we will have to deal with over the coming decades.<sup>2</sup> Which is displacement caused by violence but made worse by climate change.<sup>3</sup> The Syrian civil war is a good example of a political problem accelerated by climate change. In the eight years from 2011 to 2019, nearly seven million Syrians were displaced within the country and another six million fled the country altogether. Over half of the country's population has been forced from their homes.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, our nation has collectively decided that we have five loaves and two fish, and we feel like we used to have six loaves and three fish, so we need people to fend for themselves. We don't have enough for Syrian refugees. So send the crowds away. The result is as predictable as it is shameful. In 2018, the United States resettled sixty-two Syrian refugees.<sup>5</sup> Not sixty-two percent of applicants. Not sixty-two hundred. Sixty-two. You could fit them all on a school bus. And this isn't some weird statistical anomaly. We've cut the number of refugees we resettle so low that last October we resettled zero refugees. Not zero from Syria. Zero from anywhere.

We can survive. Some people can't. There's a gap. That's unfortunate.

The miracle in the story is that there is more bread and more fish. And that's great. But it only gets you so far. The real lasting transformation in the story takes place within the disciples who learn to participate, to live in a different kind of moral economy. One that looks at what we have and sees opportunity instead of scarcity. That sees other people as co-laborers instead of sucks on our resources. That, instead of sending the crowds away, tries to draw them in closer.

That's probably why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all wanted their communities of faith to understand this story in particular. Not because it's impressive that Jesus made so much from so little. But because this is the power Jesus gives us. To imagine new ways of living outside the narrative that we don't have enough.

That's the real lasting miracle of the story. To be a part of this community of faith that is drawn together by the Holy Spirit, is to be given a different vision of what we have to offer.

We have five loaves and two fish. So bring the crowds here. If they can't flourish, neither can we. There's no gap. That's fortunate.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>2</sup> A collective action problem is a problem where, in order to achieve an outcome everyone wants, everyone has to act against their immediate self-interest. People resist taking actions in the long-term best interest of the group out of fear that someone will take advantage of their actions. The overfishing of Atlantic cod is another good example of this. It is in everyone's long-term interest to leave enough fish so that they can reproduce and create more supply for future seasons. But fearing that someone would take advantage of the leftover fish to make a profit, people overfish and reduced the supply to zero. If this seems off topic, remember the parable is about loaves and fishes.

<sup>3</sup> John Podesta, "The Climate Crisis, Migration, and Refugees," *Brookings Institution*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>

<sup>4</sup> Zoe Todd, "By the Numbers: Syrian Refugees Around the World," *PBS Frontline*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/numbers-syrian-refugees-around-world/>

<sup>5</sup> It's worth remembering this statistic the next time someone claims that the United States is a Christian nation.

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