

For the past several weeks we have been hearing Jesus' parables describing the Kingdom of Heaven. Although today's gospel has been wrongly referred to as a parable by some people and while it can serve as a parable for our modern times, it is not a parable. Jesus miraculously fed over five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. This miracle appears in all four gospels although there are subtle differences in each account. Matthew and Mark also refer to a feeding of over four thousand people.

Some people claim that the miracle of these gospels is that everyone shared what they had with each other and everyone was satisfied. Is that really what we see? Matthew and Luke both tell us that Jesus said, "Give them some food yourselves," suggesting that the disciples were to give their own food to the crowd. John and Mark imply that some type of collection was taken up but in John's gospel only one boy had food he was willing to share and in Mark's gospel can we really believe that out of five thousand people, five loaves and two fish were all they could come up with? Not only did the so-called "miracle of sharing resources" not happen, interpreting the multiplication of loaves and fishes in this way eliminates the truly miraculous nature of what Jesus did and it doesn't make sense with the response of the crowd in John's gospel when they proclaim Jesus to be "the prophet who is to come into the world" and they wanted to carry him off and make him a king.

While the gospel writers were telling us about a true miracle, how might we interpret it as a parable for our modern age? First, if people in the crowd didn't bring food with them, they seem to be rather unprepared. Maybe they did have food, but ate it all: still unprepared. How many times do people go into situations without being fully prepared for what they might encounter and then expect others to get them out of it? For example, how many people go out on a long hike on a hot day without adequate water or without a map or even decent shoes? Or...how many people come to Mass without having prepared by reading the scriptures or some other way to prepare themselves? We need to trust in Jesus but he has given us brains and intelligence so that we can cooperate with his grace and gifts and be prepared in both the material world and in our spiritual lives. We also need to take responsibility for our actions and not blame others for our own mistakes or expect them to get us out of trouble we could have avoided if we'd been better prepared.

Very few people had food which they could offer—or were willing to offer—to feed the multitude. This poses the question: how often are we willing to sit back and let other people make sacrifices for us rather than make those sacrifices ourselves or offer to help reduce the sacrifices the others are making? Next time you come to Mass, pay attention to the faces of the greeters and ushers. At the evening Masses they tend to be the same people every week. In some cases, I see those same people at multiple Masses on the same day. And, I see many of those same people involved in many different ministries. In other words, a relatively small number of people bear most of the burden in the life of our parish. I have had people ask me why we don't seem to have very many ministries or as many social activities. Why is that? Because when people ask or complain about it and I ask, "Are you willing to help with that?" their answer is "No" or "Let me get back to you on that" in which case I never hear—or sometimes even see—them again. If you guys want a thriving parish, everyone must get involved.

Again, very few people offered food to feed the multitude. But at least some of them did offer what little they had which leads into the next lesson. In all four gospels, the disciples said something along the lines of "What good will so little do in the face of so many?" When placed in the hands of Jesus, the amount of what was offered no longer mattered. When placed in Jesus' hands, even the smallest or seemingly inconsequential gifts can work great wonders. The only time they can't work wonders is when we fail to offer them.

The final lesson. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus blessed the food. John tells us that Jesus also gave thanks for the food. Pay attention to the second "I believe" statement in the Creed. Jesus, who is true God from true God through whom all things are made, gives thanks for the food which wouldn't exist without him. What does that tell us? What does that say about us when we complain? I am speaking to myself as much as I am to you. If God is grateful, shouldn't we be grateful as well? Instead of counting our curses, shouldn't we try counting our blessings? If nothing else, can we not at least be grateful to Jesus that he sacrificed his life for ours and left us a memorial of that sacrifice—the Eucharist—his very flesh and blood—so that we who eat his flesh and blood can have hope of eternal life with him in heaven?