

The disciples had been sent out - two by two. They have seen and done wonders and miracles 'by their own hands'. Now they've found their way back to Jesus, who says 'Hey; let's take some time to talk about what's just happened...' It's been a hectic time. They had not even had a chance for a meal. So away they go; across the lake to a secluded spot. But there's no chance to talk; to sort out the many questions that must be filling the disciple's heads. No chance to grab a quick bite (though they seem to have come prepared for that). No chance to rest and refresh themselves, because the crowds desire to 'see Jesus' is relentless.

They've seen him with his friends. They seem to know where he is going, and meet him (and the 12) on the beach. We are not surprised. The disciples must be used to this by now. But it's late; they're tired and they need some down time. That was the point of this little side trip, after all. But that will have to wait, because the crowds are persistent and pressing in. And everybody's hungry. The disciples have had enough. "Send them home" they say. 'It's late and food is scarce.' But Jesus wants another miracle.

"You give them something to eat."

it is quite a scene, really; an isolated beach; thousands of hungry, curious, needy people. Twelve of them on their last nerve, longing for a bit of time alone with their master. No one is where they ought to be - everyone is out of place...except Jesus. And he looks to his weary, frustrated students and says 'you give them something...' But they can't. They won't. 'It'll cost too much...

it's too late...it's too hard...we're too tired.' The one thing they have plenty of is excuses. And when the excuses run out, Jesus takes over.

'Get them seated. Tell me what you have' (just enough for us. not enough...not nearly enough for everyone) But that little bit is blessed and broken and shared and of course there's enough, There is always enough. Enough food; enough blessing; enough sSpirit; enough love. God never runs out, and Jesus never grows tired of showing us how much can be accomplished with the resources at hand.

My friend Rob and I have had some pretty exhaustive discussions about this miracle in particular. We have different opinions on how miracles like this operate, and that's fine. But I'm more and more convinced that the miracle here has nothing to do with a little bit of food feeding a teeming crowd of people. The food is a symbol. The hunger is symbolic. The lesson is beautifully taught...for those willing to see past the details.

I came home from a week in Ontario to what some might consider a tempest in a teapot. A politician dropped from his party's nominating race due to past comments. Hateful signs spouting racist propaganda appeared on several churches in the city - ours included. Two seemingly unrelated incidents which each suggest similar levels of ignorance and misunderstanding. These comments and posters are directed at immigrants - strangers - those who are not like us. These individuals and organizations dare to suggest that there is not enough - that somehow, 'our' survival is threatened because of the presence of these 'others'...and there is always a danger of these hateful attitudes winning the day.

Public opinion these days is a fickle thing. Public conversations are quickly polarized. Even in countries of embarrassing abundance, we are quick to say "we're tired, it's too hard, and there's not enough" The stories we tell ourselves can quickly become our reality. The tone of public opinion occasionally suggests that there is not enough compassion, not enough tolerance, not enough gratitude, patience, sympathy, understanding...not enough humanity in the city - the country - the world.

But back to the gospel then - for here we see a glimpse of our reality overlayed with God's desire for our reality.

People. Pressing in on all sides. Needy, hopeful, helpless people. Each of them and all of them hungry for something more. That is the permanent human condition, isn't it? It is present in the insatiable questions of children. It continues in the competition of teenagers. As adults we fill this need with work and homes and families and adventures. We are never really satisfied, if we're being honest. And in that group are a dozen who should know better, saying it can't be done. This crowd can't be fed. We're out of our depth, Jesus - send them away. And with that, Jesus invokes the miraculous.

Human reality and Divine reality collide in a prayer over a pitifully small lunch. Divine reality prevails. The miracle story tells us that "those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men." But the miracle is that so many people (5000 men, plus their women and children?) had their hunger for more satisfied by Jesus. This hunger, so much a part of who we are, longs for a taste of God. Since the earliest chapters of Genesis - when humans, made in God's image, are separated from God's presence by pride and disobedience - since

that moment, we have been trying to satisfy our hunger for God. We have used no end of substitutes, but within us we have the ability to recognize the 'real thing' when we see it - when it is offered.

So crowds swarmed to Jesus - he couldn't seem to avoid them, even when he wanted to; and as congregations shrink and churches struggle, more and more people declare themselves to be "Spiritual (but NOT religious...); and communities and individuals and nations reach out in compassion to those whose lives have been destroyed by their own government's lack of compassion all because we hunger for something more. The things of God satisfy us more deeply, more completely, than anything we can do for ourselves.

The miracle is in the discovery that there is enough. There is always enough. The miracle is the discovery of compassion and shared humanity that (sorry Rob) turns 5 loaves into a community pot-luck because, as it turns out, generosity encourages generosity, and food that might have been squirrelled away by those who came prepared to feed themselves, now find themselves moved to share with strangers. The miracle is that God is amongst the hungry and the needy, opening doors and creating connections that lead to fulfilment. Jesus doesn't say "That's what the kingdom of God is like" - he doesn't need to say it. The hungry are fed. The needs of the searchers have been fulfilled. Compassion has been offered and accepted. And that IS what the kingdom of God is like.