

“They All Ate And Were Satisfied”

Mark 6:31-44

January 2, 2011

Introduction:

A Man With No Shirt

The story is told of a king who was discontented. And although everything in his kingdom was at his beckon command, he was thoroughly dissatisfied with his own life. So much so that he came extremely anxious, unable to sleep, rest, or think clearly. One day, in desperation, he called his wise men and asked them what he could do.

One very old and very wise man said, “Find a man in your kingdom who is content, then wear his shirt for a day and night, and you will be content.”

That sounded like a good idea to the king, so he ordered some of his servants to go and search for such a person. After many weeks his servants returned. The king of course wanted to know if they had found a contented man, satisfied with life. The king’s servants assured the king that they had indeed found such a man.

“Where is his shirt?” asked the king. “Your majesty, he didn’t have one.”¹

I Can’t Get No (Satisfaction)

What brings genuine, lasting meaning / purpose / happiness / satisfaction to life? It is THE question of the ages. And the answers offered to us by our culture are legion – and woefully inadequate.

Whether it is the over 190 million prescriptions for antidepressants like Prozac, Zoloft, and Paxil that are written in this country each year; or the recent news of Hugh Hefner who at age 84 became engaged for the third time to one of his current Playmates; or Tom Brady, who after winning his third Super Bowl ring confessed that while he had reached all his personal dreams and goals, he still thought there was something lacking in his life²; or the recent Christmas commercial where father and son are in a music store looking at guitars. The father chirps “Look son, this is almost the same as the one you wanted.” To which the son, rolls his eyes and sarcastically says, “No it isn’t.”

We are a nation searching – a people searching for something – something that will somehow, magically satisfy the longing that is gnawing at our souls. It is as one of my favorite group of theologians, the Rolling Stones, have so eloquently put it “*I Can’t Get No (Satisfaction)*”.³ (Cause I’ve tried, and I’ve tried, and I’ve tried, and I’ve tried.) And so have you!

¹ Steve Brown, *Jumping Hurdles*. Baker Books, 1992; p. 162.

² “Quarterback Tom Brady Still Searching”. www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations. January 2008.

³ “I Can’t Get No (Satisfaction). Written by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards, produced by Andrew Oldham; Decca Records 1965.

Mark 6:42

That is why on this first Sunday of the New Year, I've entitled this sermon, "*They All Ate And Were Satisfied*", taken from Mark 6:42. I could just as easily have entitled it, "The Gift That Truly Satisfies", or "The God Who Feeds My Soul". For this marvelous passage we are brought face to face with the God who does just that.

So, if you and I want to find true satisfaction in this New Year of 2011, it is ours for the asking. *True satisfaction however, is only found when we get to know God, the God who...*

I. The God Who Cares Deeply About The Genuine Needs Of People (Mark 6:31-34)

(The magnitude of the need)

The significance of this miracle

Setting the resurrection aside, this is the only miracle of Jesus found in all four of the gospel accounts. Out of all Jesus' miracles that were recorded for us, the feeding of the 5,000 is the only one all four gospel writers mention. Such a fact strongly suggests not only that what happened out in a remote area of the Galilean countryside that day was indelibly etched in the disciples minds – but that we would be wise to take a much closer look at what happened out there that day and ponder our relationship with Jesus.

This miracle is also significant because of the obvious parallels between Jesus and Moses. Both men were used by God to miraculously provide manna / food for a great number of people. Both events sustained hungry people, and hence their lives, so that they might live for another day. Even the location of the miracle in a solitary place (lit. a desert place) is reminiscent of the wilderness wandering of Israel of old.

This miracle is also significant however, because in time the disciples realized that Jesus is not merely a second Moses of sorts – although he is – but one far greater than even Moses; for it is Jesus – and not Moses – who offers to provide more than temporary, daily sustenance. It is Jesus, and Jesus alone, who offers and provides what he called "living bread" – something that would keep them alive forever; eternal life / salvation for his people.

As such, this miracle prepares the way for the day when Jesus would make the staggering declaration, "*I Am the bread of life*" – The true bread that came down from the Father's hand in heaven – The One who guaranteed that "He who comes to me will never go hungry" (John 6:32-35).

And in time, this miracle prepared them (and us) for what we now know as the Lord's Supper. The Passover celebration where in the Upper Room Jesus once again breaks bread, gives thanks, and says "This is my body broken for you" (Luke 22:19).

A. An Unending Sea Of Humanity Coming With An Ocean Full Of Needs**The Magnitude Of The Need**

Jesus steps out of the boat on a remote section of the Sea of Galilee, hoping for a bit of R & R, only to find a vast multitude of people following him on foot. He is confronted by a sea of humanity with an ocean full

of needs. He is dogged by people, who whether they realize it or not, are searching. They are searching for something that will truly satisfy – something that gives true meaning and genuine purpose to life. Jesus has come looking for a place to hide and rest. Yet on this particular day, there is no place for Jesus and his disciples to do either.

Yet, we are told that when Jesus sees the great multitude of folks, he has compassion on them (v.14). The word “compassion” is an intense one, which at its root, has to do with the viscera, or stomach. It is the same word used of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who when he saw his son from afar “was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). Jesus, we might say, had a “gut” reaction. Such is the depth of his tender compassion for those in need – compassion that compels him to act.

Spanish philosopher Miguel DeUnamuno,⁴ expresses the need this way: “Warmth, warmth, more warmth! For we are dying of cold and not of darkness. It is not the night that kills, but the frost.”

Compassion In Action

Ludwig Van Beethoven is best known today for his musical genius. In his own day however, one thing he was not known for was social grace. This was especially so, as he began to lose his hearing. Because of his deafness, Beethoven apparently found simple conversations with people increasingly more difficult, draining, and humbling.

One day Beethoven received news of the death of a friend’s son. Beethoven immediately dropped everything and went to his friend’s home. When he arrived, Beethoven was so overcome with grief that he found he had no words of comfort to offer his friend. But he saw a piano in a corner of the room, sat down, and for the next half hour or so played the piano with all the skill he could muster, pouring out all his emotions through his fingers on the keyboard.

When finished, Beethoven left without as much as a single word. His friend later remarked that no one’s visit had meant so much to him as that of Beethoven’s.⁵ It’s called compassion.

Sheep Without A Shepherd

When Jesus looks across this seeming unending sea of humanity he is filled with compassion – the compassion of God – the God who cares deeply about the genuine needs of people.

Why was he filled with such compassion? Mark tells us that Jesus felt compassion for them “because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (6:34). Jesus looks out across the crowd and sees thousands of people as shepherd-less, defenseless, lost sheep. Jesus looks at them (and us), and sees people roaming aimlessly, searching, for something, anything – searching for him.

Jesus sees them as sheep because he, like only God can, understands the truth that people (like you and me), when left to ourselves, are spiritually speaking, lost. We are, whether we realize it or not (or even

⁴ Miguel DeUnamuno, *Quotes & Idea Starters for Preaching & Teaching*. Baker Books, 1996; p. 27.

⁵ Philip Yancey, “Beethoven’s Gift” in *More Stories for the Heart* (Compiled by Alice Gray). Multnomah, 1997; p. 25.

willing to admit it), people in need of spiritual guidance / direction in life – guidance / direction that only Jesus can truly provide.

Jesus looks out at the crowd and knows they are sheep in need of the protective care of a shepherd. A good shepherd – one who can teach them what they need to know – and one who can help them find their way home to God. Jesus is the good shepherd for people seeking true meaning, purpose, guidance and direction in life. A good shepherd for people seeking something that truly satisfies. The kind of shepherd David spoke of in Psalm 23 who “makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside still waters, and restores my soul”. Jesus, the “Good Shepherd”, who is so concerned about his sheep that he will, in the not so distant future, willingly lay down his life for his sheep (John 10:11-14).

Recap & Transition

A. An Unending Sea Of Humanity Coming With An Ocean Full Of Needs

B. An Unending Sea Of Humanity Searching For Something That Truly Satisfies

But Just Where To Begin?

Jesus sees the great multitude coming to him and reacts with compassion for them – compassion of a good shepherd for his flock. That compassion now moves him to do something about their needs. The question is what? By the end of the day Jesus will feed their stomachs. But first – he will feed their souls.

Why teach first? Because when Jesus (not to mention his disciples) looks out at the enormous crowd (an estimated 5,000 men + women + children), not to mention the myriad of needs, the question is not merely how do you care for so many? But how do you even assess who to care for first? What priorities do you use to guide you? What needs of necessity, take a back seat to other seemingly more pressing ones?

Where Jesus Chooses To Begin

It is instructive that Jesus looks out on a sea of humanity with a list of needs that stretch out forever – and he begins “to teach them many things” (6:34). What kind of things? Specifically, Jesus will teach them things about “the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:11).

Now before the day is finished, Jesus will indeed heal many. And if you are the person in need of healing that often seems like the most obvious place to start. Before the day is done Jesus will not only heal, but also feed. And again, if you are the person unable to put food on the table for your family or provide gifts under the Christmas tree for your kids, that issue will understandably be perceived to be the most pressing on a hierarchy of needs.

Jesus will both heal and feed all who are willing to hang around long enough. But that is not where Jesus begins. Mark, who records Peter’s recollection of the events of that day, makes the point that Jesus “*began*” by teaching them. And, he points out, Jesus taught them “*many*” things. In other words, this wasn’t a short sermon. These folks weren’t going to be able to sing the closing hymn and beat the Baptists to the local restaurants before they were all full.☺ Jesus *begins* by teaching them *many* things.

Why teach first? Because Jesus knows that their true need / ultimate need / most important need is the same as ours. And Jesus, despite common misconceptions now as well as then, didn't come to planet earth *merely* to provide something that would sustain their physical being (as important as that is), but to offer them (and us), something that will truly satisfy the soul. Something immaterial but more worth having than anything this world offers. Something that cannot be destroyed. Something of infinite value. Something that endures the test of time. Something eternal.

That was, and always is the primary priority of Jesus – because *that* is truly the ultimate need. It isn't either / or, but both / and. The physical and spiritual go hand in hand. On one hand, giving someone a Bible without attempting to in some way address genuine human need comes off as less than compassionate / caring. The old adage, “people don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care”, comes to mind here. But the flip side is that simply filling bellies and improving lives (as noble as that is), without also filling hearts / souls with the good news of eternal life through Jesus Christ, falls far short of the gospel as well.

What the church of Jesus Christ must never forget

What the church of Jesus Christ must never forget is that our first and foremost priority is addressing the spiritual needs of people. If we don't remember this truth, we will find at the end of the day that we have not really helped people – not in the ultimate or eternal sense of helping them. And if we lose sight of our primary mission / calling from Christ to go make disciples by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 29:19-20), we will become no different than any other number of fine service organizations in existence. The good news about forgiveness of sins by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is our particular “niche,” if you will. That is the salt and light we bring to this dark and fallen world. It is what makes all our various ministries at Cornerstone unique from other civic groups around us.

It is not an issue of bad vs. good; but rather, the gospel is all about coming at life from a completely different perspective / set of priorities. Priorities which we need to be reminded of & refocused on periodically, or the gospel gets lost in a myriad of good things and the more obvious, pressing needs.

The most compassionate / loving thing we can do for people is to be passionate about Christ – living and sharing the love of God available through Christ. Jesus Christ, the bread of life – the bread that truly satisfies. The bread He offers as we gather this morning around the table.

Recap & Transition:

If you and I want to find true satisfaction in this New Year of 2011, it is ours for the asking. *True satisfaction however, is only found when we get to know God, the God who...*

I. The God Who Cares Deeply About The Genuine Needs of People (Mark 6:31-34)

(The magnitude of the need)

II. The God Who (Despite His Great Compassion), Waits Until We Realize Our Own Human Inability (Mark 6:35-38)

(The meagerness of our own resources)

A. Our Absolute Inability To Meet Our True Need(s) All By Ourselves

The Disciples' Big Idea

As Jesus continues ministering throughout the day, the shadows slowly but surely begin to grow longer with each passing hour. At some point, late in the day, the disciples approach Jesus expressing their concern that daylight is waning and the nearest town is some miles away. They have decided among themselves that it would be wise to bring the worship service to a close so everyone could hopefully find some food and lodging for the night. And (in their immense wisdom), they have nominated Jesus for the job of pronouncing the benediction and getting rid of / sending the people away.

Now whether the disciples' concern is for themselves or others is unclear. It could be they truly are worried about the welfare of these folks. Or it could simply be that the disciples themselves are tired, hungry and would like some downtime just for them. Time to sit down and eat in peace – the very reason they had left the last crowd behind (6:31). Anyone who has been actively involved in ministry for longer than five minutes knows the feeling of being drained without any foreseeable break in sight.

No foreseeable Break In Sight

Years ago, I had the privilege of traveling with a team to southern India for two weeks. To say that the experience was life changing doesn't begin to express the impact upon my soul. In preparation for the trip I was told that I needed to be ready to teach / preach three, maybe four times – just in case. Little did I know that after arriving, I would be called upon to speak four times the first day we ventured out into a rural area. In addition to emptying my complete "repertoire", we ministered throughout the day in heat that was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and we walked everywhere we went. I can still see myself dragging my weary body up a dirt incline as we entered a small village near dusk – completely spent and worse – no foreseeable break in sight. "Send them away Jesus..."

Jesus Has A Far Better Idea

While their true motives are unclear – what seems crystal clear is that the disciples are not prepared for Jesus' shocking order. Jesus has a completely different idea – "You give them something to eat" (6:37). The "you" is emphatic and an imperative (i.e. command).

The disciples are floored and ask incredulously how can they possibly feed so many people? To do so (even if they had the desire – and it doesn't appear they don't), would take something in the neighborhood of eight months wages (two hundred denarii). Does Jesus really expect us to go and spend that much money on bread, haul it back, and then hand it out to everyone before dark? And even assuming we had enough money (which we don't), there isn't enough bread to be found – anywhere.

Any bean counter can see the absolute foolishness of what Jesus is asking. The whole idea is about as plausible as squeezing an elephant up your nose. (Unless of course, Jesus knows something that they / we don't – and as it always turns out, he does.)

Mission Impossible

You simply can't teach an old dog, new tricks. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. You can't get blood from a turnip. You can't change a leopard's spots. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.

We have many different ways to express the idea, but the point is still the same. It can't be done. It is impossible. There are (despite our favorite movie or song), just some mountains that humanly speaking are too high to climb. There are some rivers too wide and swift to swim across safely. There are some valleys that are so deep and dark that you will never find your way out of – regardless how smart, gifted, talented, wealthy, etc. you might be. The sobering truth about life is that *The Little Engine That Could*⁶ – sometimes can't – not always – regardless of how much positive thinking / or even faith one exercises.

Bottom line: In this fallen world in which we live, there are just some things that are simply beyond our control. What needs to happen isn't going to happen. What needs to change isn't going to change. What I'm facing can't be fixed. I know, because I've already tried. What I am facing is beyond my ability. What you are asking of me Jesus, is in a word, impossible.

What am I going to do when there isn't anything (humanly speaking) I can do? What do you expect me to do, Jesus? I'm sorry Lord, but I've prayed until I'm clean out of prayers. Sooner or later God will use life to help us / force us / humble us to admit our absolute human inability to meet our need(s) all by ourselves - even if we pool all our available resources.

B. Our Absolute Inability Even If We Collectively Pool All Our Available Resources (6:38)

And As If Things Weren't Bad Enough

At some point Jesus asks a question – a pointed, uncomfortable question of his disciples. “How many loaves do you have?” he wants to know. It is a question that shifts their focus to a slightly different problem; one that moves the emphasis from the magnitude of the need to the meagerness of the available resources even further. While positive thinking would suggest that Jesus now shifts the disciples' thinking from what they *don't* have (i.e. the problem), to what they *do* have (i.e. the solution); that idea while nice, is hardly helpful at this moment. For to shift one's thinking to what one “has” in this situation, only exacerbates the problem even more. Focusing what they *do* have enlarges the meagerness of their resources even more.

Jesus simply asks, “How many loaves do you have?” The disciples obviously don't have a clue. So Jesus instructs them to go find out. While obviously not wild about this new assignment, the disciples to their credit, scour the congregation to give Jesus an answer. We don't know how long or diligently they looked, but at some point they return and tell Jesus they have found a boy with five loaves and two fish – five small barley cakes and two salted sardines.

Now we know from John's account, that it was Andrew who found the boy and brought him to Jesus. Andrew is also the one who then asks, “But how far will this go among so many?” (John 6:9).

Screaming Silence

⁶ Watty Piper, *The Little Engine That Could*. Platt & Munk Publishers, 1976.

You can almost hear the mental gears grinding. We told you so – there simply isn't enough Jesus. You could have saved everyone a lot of hard work and precious time if you had just listened to us Jesus.

What is fascinating is that between verses thirty eight and nine, Jesus doesn't appear to comment on the disciples' assessment of the situation. He is silent on that point (i.e. "But how far will this go among so many?"). Why? Jesus wants the utter human impossibility of the situation to sink in. Because Jesus knows it is only when we begin to grasp the enormity of our need that our human pride begins to crumble and humility begins to grow within our broken hearts. Jesus knows that it is only when our failed human effort ends, that genuine faith of necessity begins – and not before.

Jesus, this _____ is all I have to bring – and it isn't enough. It's not ever going to be enough. I've tried this on my own, and I've come up empty – again. "(Jesus), there is a lad here, who has five barley loaves, and two fish, but what are these for so many people?" (John 6:9).

The Goodness Of The God Who Waits

While none of us like the process of being in a situation where our own human resources are shown to be woefully inadequate for the need, it is good to be reminded of the meagerness of our own human limitations from time to time. It is not only good, but absolutely essential to our spiritual growth / maturity, to be forced to grapple with that reality.

In fact, the God who cares about us deeply, will often wait until we come to such a place. He does so, because it is then, and only then, that there is no mistake as to where the power comes from / the solution lies / the help can be found. God waits because it is only after we are willing to be willing to admit not only the magnitude of our need, but our own inability to meet that need, that God will offer to graciously meet that need.

We have often heard it said that "God helps those who help themselves." The truth is "God helps those who can't help themselves and who know they can't."⁷

Pennies From Heaven

"What Phillip and Andrew don't see is that impossible situations are not solved by how much we have in our purses or baskets, not by how adequate our bank account or how abundant our assets. Impossibilities are solved by miracles – pennies from heaven, and Jesus has a pocketful. That is where to go to get bread."⁸

It is why we approach the Table today – to partake of the bread and the cup – and commune with *the God Who...*

Does Care Deeply About The Genuine Needs Of People (Yours And Mine), But Waits Until We Realize Our Own Human Inability

Recap & Transition

⁷ Steve Brown, *Jumping Hurdles*. Baker Books, 1992; p 146.

⁸ Ken Gire, *Incredible Moments with the Savior*. Zondervan, 1990; p. 59.

I. The God Who Cares Deeply About The Genuine Needs Of People (Mark 6:31-34)

II. The God Who (Despite His Great Compassion), Waits Until We Realize Our Own Human Inability (Mark 6:35-38)

III. The God Who Graciously Offers To Meet The Need For Us (Mark 6:39-44)

Having allowed the disciples to wrestle with the magnitude of the need, and the meagerness of the resources, Jesus now reveals to them the secret of the Manna that only comes from heaven through him.

A. The Blessing Of Brokenness When We Place The Pieces In His Hand

After waiting for what probably seemed like an eternity, Jesus goes into action. As the second and far greater Moses, he now prepares a feast for his people in the wilderness.

Saying Grace

Jesus first gives directions regarding the seating arrangements (6:39-40). He gives the command for everyone to sit down in small groups on the grass. This will not only facilitate an orderly distribution of the meal, but will also allow the ushers to get an accurate head count during the offering. ☺ And unlike the old lady in the burger commercial years ago, Jesus doesn't look into the bag, inspect the boy's lunch, and ask "Where's the beef?"

Instead, Matthew's gospel tells us (14:19), Jesus first lifts his eyes to heaven and gives thanks for the meal. He gives the ancient Jewish blessing, "Blessed art Thou, O LORD our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." And five thousand men answer – Amen!

Then as Jesus is blessing a meal totally inadequate for the need, he begins breaking the pieces into pieces (Mk. 6:41).

Blessing And Brokenness

Jesus' actions reveal a wonderful but sobering truth – there is a connection between blessing and brokenness. For you see, it is only as Jesus is breaking the food that the miracle of God's blessing begins to occur. I don't know about you (although I have a pretty good idea), but I very much like the idea of God's blessings and in particular of God blessing me. "Bless me Lord – bless me real good, if you don't mind." I'm not, on the other hand, too wild about the idea of being broken. So any connection between being blessed and being broken is something that if possible, I would rather avoid at all costs.

Bob Benson in his book, *See You At The House*, puts it this way... "Just bless me, Lord. It's okay. Just any time you want to, jump right in. Just break right in on anything I am doing and it'll be okay. Any time you want to Lord, I can take. I can handle a blessing. Send me a raise, a new house, whatever. It's okay with me."⁹

You and I love the idea of being blessed, but for obvious reasons we aren't quite so keen however, on the idea of being broken. Yet the Communion Table gives silent testimony to the truth of the matter; for it was

⁹ Bob Benson, *See You At The House*. Thomas Nelson, 1989; p.?

through the brokenness of Jesus' own life on the cross that the blessings of Christ were secured for us – and offered to us at the Table. The Jesus who was broken for us, is also the same Jesus who can take the broken fragments of your life (and mine), and in His own way and time bring great blessing out of that brokenness – if that is, we are willing to surrender our lives into his capable, compassionate hands. And then, after having surrendered those broken pieces to Him, we don't try to take them back.

Broken Dreams¹⁰ (Lauretta Burns)

As Children bring their broken toys with tears for us to mend
 I brought my broken dreams to God because He is my friend.
 But then, instead of leaving him in peace to work alone
 I hung around and tried to help with ways that were my own.
 At last I snatched them back and cried, “How can you be so slow?”
 “My child, He said, “What could I do...
 you never did let go.”

In a word it's called: surrender!

There is a blessing that grows out of brokenness when our lives are placed in His hand. And even more wonderful, there is the blessing of multiplication when we look to Him – and Him alone to meet the need.

B. The Blessing Of Multiplication When We Look To Jesus Alone

So What Just Happened?

The text says that as Jesus broke and then gave (imperfect tense) the pieces, something unforeseen, totally unexpected, beyond unbelievable happened. That is, as he kept on breaking and giving out the bread and fish, the bread and fish somehow keep multiplying. And the disciples are dumbfounded as they watch it all happen before their very own eyes. And even then, they can't believe it – at first.

Again, the fact that this miracle of Jesus, and this miracle alone, is found in all four of the gospel accounts speaks volumes about how indelibly etched this moment will become in their memories – forever.

They watch as Jesus reaches down into a little boy's lunch bag and pull out – not a rabbit – but bread – and then more bread – and more bread – and more bread – and more bread... Thousands upon thousands of broken pieces of bread and fish, which Jesus then places into the disciples' waiting hands – over and over and over again. And then they in turn, walk around (calmly, casually?), and serve the unsuspecting thousands who were, as instructed, seated waiting on the grass.

And that continues over and over again, until everyone was fed and “satisfied” (6:42). Jesus sees the multitude on that day, feels compassion for them, feeds them from his own hands, and fills everyone who had come to him. And Jesus still does the same today for anyone here who will simply seek His face, wait on His instructions, and allow Him to meet your need.

Satisfaction Guaranteed

¹⁰ Lauretta P. Burns, “Broken Dreams” in *Stories for the Heart* (Compiled by Alice Gray). Multnomah, 1996; p. 229.

It is as God promised so long ago through His prophet Isaiah:

“Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to Me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare” (Isaiah 55:1-2).

What To Do With The Leftovers?

And when the dust settles, they even have twelve baskets of fragments left over (6:43). In that day it was customary at Jewish feasts to leave something for the servants who served the meal. In our day we would call it a tip – a way of saying thank-you in appreciation for their service.

Well, who are the servants at this meal? The servants are obviously the twelve disciples who had brought the boy and placed the bread and fish into Jesus’ hands. The same twelve who then received back the bread and fish, now broken and blessed from Jesus’ own hands. The twelve disciples who (understandably) didn’t believe it could be done. These were the twelve who could barely believe their own eyes, even as they were standing next to Jesus and watching what was happening. And the same twelve disciples who in their hearts are now wondering, “Who is this Jesus?” The twelve baskets were for the twelve and their families. It was in a sense, Jesus’ way of saying thank-you to them for their service to Him, and His way of also blessing them and their families.

Boxing Day In Canada

As a boy, the day after Christmas was often spent visiting with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins – all who lived across the Detroit River in Windsor, Ontario. And in Canada, they celebrate a holiday on December 26th called Boxing Day. What I never understood as a child was that Boxing Day has absolutely nothing to do with boxing, nor is it a day for people to return their unwanted Christmas presents.

While the exact origins of the holiday are unclear, it is generally believed to have started in England during the Middle Ages. Since the servants (lower classes) of the wealthy were required to work on Christmas day, preparing the Christmas meal and the like for their employers, they were then allowed to take the 26th off to spend with their families.

And as the servants were preparing to leave to visit their families and Celebrate Christmas, their employers would often present them with various kinds of gifts (including left-over food from the previous day’s Christmas feast), sort of a post-Christmas bonus and way of saying thank-you in appreciation for a job well done. The gifts were placed in boxes to simply make transporting them home easier. The servants then took the boxes home and celebrated Christmas with their families.

God’s Thank-You

The twelve baskets of fragments left over for the disciples on that day are a wonderful reminder that God always honors / blesses the giving of yourself and your (meager) resources, when given for His sake. The twelve baskets are His way of blessing us – of saying thank-you / honoring your service to Him.

Several Blessings All Rolled Into One

In a sense there are several blessings that are part of the miracle that happened out in the Galilean countryside on that day. There is the blessing of brokenness and watching your totally inadequate resources multiply beyond belief when placed in Jesus' hands. There is also the blessing of participation in – of being used by God to bless others as a result – of receiving from Jesus' hand into our own hands, that which we then place in the hands of others. And there is the blessing of Jesus' thank-you and His giving gifts thus honoring our service to Him. We are blessed by Christ to be a blessing, and in turn are blessed once again by Him.

How It All Got Started

It could be said that this miracle got rolling when Andrew found a small boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish (John 6:8-9). An unnamed boy whose mom (or dad perhaps) packed him a lunch – a lunch he was willing to give to Jesus.

That small boy is a reminder of how God often chooses to bring the bread of life to a needy world – a world that on this first Sunday in January desperately wishes there really was going to be such a thing as a Happy New Year.

Now, the humbling truth is that God can do just fine without us. He didn't need the boy's lunch or ours either. Nor did he need his disciples to distribute the broken pieces for him. But the marvel is that God graciously chooses to use us. He delights in including us in His plan. He even invites us to participate with Him in His work.

That small boy is also a reminder that God can / will use a very small thing if it is submitted / surrendered to Him. Someone has said, "God must delight in using ordinary people with ordinary gifts, because he made so many of us!" As the old song reminds us, God uses ordinary people. And at the end of the day, God uses ordinary, common clay jars like us so that there is no mistake as to where the power for the miracle comes from. "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Little People Of The Bible

Have you ever reflected on how many times in the Bible (or in your life and mine), God uses seemingly insignificant people and things to accomplish some of his most amazing miracles?

God used a baby's cry to move Pharaoh's daughter's heart – and Moses was saved from certain death in the Nile (Exodus 2:5-6). God used an ordinary shepherd's rod in Moses' hand to perform many miracles and save an entire people from their bondage in Egypt (Exodus 4:1-5; 7:14-8:19; 9:22-26; 10:12-23; 14:15-31). God used a young shepherd boy named David and his sling shot to bring down mighty Goliath (1 Samuel 17). God used a widow's handful of flour and jar of oil to keep the prophet Elijah and her family alive during a time of great famine (1 Kings 17:7-16). And here God uses a young unnamed boy and his lunch to feed 5,000 men, plus the women and children.

By the way, why not record the boy's name? Because he was not the one who performed the miracle – but was privileged to be the human vessel through whom God chose to work. And because the five loaves and two fish are laughable when faced with such a multitude of people – but when placed in the hands of Jesus feed more than one could ever imagine.

Mother Theresa And God's Arithmetic

When Mother Theresa began her work among the poorest of the poor in India, she began with only a few pennies to her name. When told that her penny was nothing in the face of such enormous poverty she replied, "Theresa and a penny are nothing, but Theresa and a penny and God are everything." And the rest as they say is history.

Bringing Everything To A Close

This morning, we have been blessed to meet around the Table with the God who cares deeply about our needs. He is the same God who is waiting, even in this moment – waiting to see if we are humble enough to admit our complete inability to meet that need by ourselves. And He is the same God who now through Jesus Christ offers to meet that need for each and every one of us. The elders will be down front to pray with you. They, like the disciples of old, are God's hands to pray over you. Come now, and experience the blessing of brokenness as you place the pieces in His compassionate, caring Hands.