

“How Many Loaves Do You Have?”

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Let's get right into it. The question in front of us today, in this “Quest” series, where we're looking at questions Jesus asked of his followers, questions he puts in front of us today, is one of those questions that, on the surface, seems rather simple and straightforward.

There's nothing complicated about today's question. There's nothing hard to (find and figure out) when it comes to the answer. And, (unless I'm missing something), there's no “hidden agenda” in the question he asks. (More often than not, there isn't.) Jesus doesn't try to “trick us” into anything. His questions aren't designed to be some “bait and switch”, to suck us into something we didn't see coming. That's not what he's doing. It's not what he does.

At the same time, what he does is, he challenges us with questions that challenge us to think beyond the answers that are straightforward and simple. He often does that. He does that with designed intent. Today's question is one of those kinds of questions.

“How Many Loaves Do You Have?” (How Many Loaves Do You Have?) As I've thought about this “feeding of the five thousand” story, over the years, I've often been fascinated by that question. It's the kind of question, given the context in which it was first asked, that asks the disciples to come up with a solution to an obvious problem, where the solution to the problem is not quite so obvious.

Now, in some settings, it's an easy question. Out on the playground, time for lunch, one of the kids forgot to bring theirs. There's an obvious problem in need of a solution, and (in that setting), the solution to the problem is obvious. It's easy to figure out how we can find enough for there (to be enough) for all of us to eat.

You know how that works. In grade school, “even the less than generous kids” give something. “My Mom gave me an apple in my lunch. (I don't like apples.) You can have mine.” “My Mom packed some carrots. (“You can definitely have my carrots.”) Add to that the more generous offers of (half a sandwich, a few chips, a cookie or two) and we're all good.

There's plenty to eat, when there's more than enough to eat. There's all we need to go around when there more than we need to go around. It's an easy solution (to an obvious problem) when the obvious problem offers an easy solution.

But what about (in the Christian life) when it doesn't? What about (in our faith-walk with Jesus) when there's not? What about when the hard realities of the situations you face (in life) go far beyond the possible solutions you think there might be? In other words, what do we do (as followers of Jesus) when what (we have to offer) as an answer, comes up short in providing an answer that we think might actually work?

“How Many Loaves Do You Have?” Let's talk (for a moment) about the story. Remember the context? We read more than the “feeding story” itself. The context (for the story) was at the end of a long day. The disciples (and Jesus) were tired.

Mark tells us, they had tried (earlier that day) to get away, but it didn't happen. The people kept coming. And because they kept coming, Jesus kept teaching. By the time it was over, they were tired. The sun was going down. They were hungry. It was time for everyone, including Jesus and the disciples, to go home.

Now, talk about an obvious problem with an easy solution. Let's pack it all up, send them all home, and everyone can figure out dinner for themselves. (Sound good, Jesus?) Not quite so fast.

That's when Jesus (in the story) says something that moves everything that's (on the table) off of the table and brings onto the table a not so easy problem to solve with a not so obvious solution to give. Remember

what he said? (He said) to his disciples, “You give them something to eat.” (He said), “You give them something to eat.”

Now, you’ve gotta love Jesus! (I mean, really!) You gotta love him! (But, really?) I’m all for finding creative solutions to challenging problems. (I really am.) In the church, (on our staff, our leadership teams), we end up with a problem (in need of a solution), we get our heads together and we figure it out. Even with some of the most challenging problems, same thing. (We talk. We pray. We come up with a solution.) No problem. I’m never afraid of going after problems, even the challenging ones.

At the same time, I don’t go looking for problems to solve. I don’t go trying to find challenges to face. On this one, honestly, I’m with the disciples. “Let’s send them home, take a break, and this particular (potential problem), does not have to become a problem. Let’s not turn it into one.”

Not so with Jesus. (Not so with Christ.) Like us, he doesn’t go looking for problems, turning non-problems into problems. But he does (often times) use real-life situations to teach real-life lessons.

“How Many Loaves Do You Have?” (We all know how this plays out.) By the time it’s over, five thousand men (plus women and children) are all fed. After serving the meal, (like any good potluck), when it’s all over, there’s still food left. (There’s more than enough to go around.) And all of this happens, (all of it happens) starting with only five loaves and two fish!

It’s interesting, how, of all the miracles Jesus performed, how this one is the only one included in all four of the gospels. All four of those stories about Jesus’ life (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), each of those writers, they all include it in their stories. They all make a point of making sure this one (in particular) isn’t missed.

When I first realized that (years ago), I thought, “Well, of course they would include it. (I mean, who wouldn’t?) After all, it’s a powerful story. (Can’t imagine.) Five thousand people? Only a few loaves and a couple of fish? Everyone goes away filled? This has to be the Messiah. This Jesus must be the Son of God. No wonder it’s in all four. They’d be foolish to leave it out. It’s interesting.

What’s also interesting, apart from the fact that it’s included in all four stories, is the fact that in two of those stories (Matthew and Mark), there’s another story of another feeding almost identical to the first. Maybe you’ve noticed that?

In this one (in chapter six), it’s 5,000 people, they’re all fed from five loaves and two fish, and the twelve disciples gather up twelve baskets of leftovers. In the next one, (chapter eight), it’s 4,000 people, they’re all fed from seven loaves and a few fish, and the same disciples (in that story) pick up seven baskets from what’s left. It’s almost the same miracle, with the same detail, only two chapters later.

What’s even (more interesting), beyond all of that other detail, is the fact that it’s the very same question asked (by Jesus) in both. “How many loaves do you have?” The same story, the same disciples, the same question, and it all plays out the same. What’s going on?

I’ll tell you what I think’s going on. What I think’s going on is that the disciples (the first time this happened), they missed it? The whole point of the story (what actually happened), and it was all missed. They saw it. They experienced. They were there when it happened, and they missed it. That’s what I think happened.

Now, full disclosure, (when I first read this story) years ago, and for quite a while after, I think I missed it. (I really do.) The same thing: a powerful miracle. Jesus must be the Messiah. There’s no question that this one has to be the Son of God. Included in all four stories, those writers are not fools. There’s no doubt. No question. And yet, I really think I missed it. I really did, because that’s not the point.

The point of the story is not the power of Jesus and not the miracle he was able to perform. Now, that’s all there and we don’t want to miss it; it’s important stuff. We have a Savior. We have a Lord who can do miraculous things, in their lives and in ours. (It’s all there.) But if that’s all we see, then we’ve missed it. The

point of the story is not found in the miracle itself, but (it's found) in the answer to the very question Jesus asks. That's the point we don't want to miss.

And so, let's go back to it again. (You tell me.) "How Many Loaves Do You Have?" How many loaves do you have? (Forget about this story.) If you're ever out in the country, with Jesus, and there's 5,000 people tagging along, then maybe you can pull it out and apply it. (Then it might work.) But, until then, forget about this story. The point is not the story. The point is in the answer to the question Jesus asks. "How many loaves do you have?" How many loaves do you have?

Take that question and apply it to your life and to your situation in life, and then it starts getting real. For whatever problems you're facing in life, "How many loaves do you have?" For whatever situation (or situations) you're facing in life, "How many loaves do you have?"

You know, when Jesus asked that question of his disciples, something tells me that he was not looking for a head count of fish. I don't think Jesus cared if there were two fish, or ten fish, or fifty fish, or five thousand fish, one for each. I don't think he cared.

What he cared about was in their answer. What he was hoping to hear (when they answered) is that they knew and understood and actually believed that (with Jesus), no matter how many fish they might find, there would be enough.

That's the question. Do you believe that (in your life) when it comes to Jesus? Do you know that and trust that in the challenges and problems you face?

Those hard days with your kids (when it's not happening) and you're running out of patience? (Take what you have and give it to Jesus, and there'll be enough to go around.) Those challenging days at school (or at work), when you don't have what it takes to make it all work? (Take what you have and give it to Christ, you might be surprised at how much there really is.)

It doesn't matter. Challenges among your friends? In Jesus, you have a friend that can help. Problems in your family? In Jesus, you're part of a family where he's at the center and can help keep it all centered.

All of things we face (in life), all of the challenges we face (in life), if we give what we have to Jesus, there will always be enough. There will always be enough, more than enough...if we give what we have to Jesus...if we offer what we have to Christ.

I don't know how many times (over the years), in the church, I've heard people say that we don't have enough of (whatever it is) that's needed (to pull off) whatever it is that's in front of us. Not enough time. Not enough money. Not enough resources. Not enough volunteers.

Even among individuals, I've heard it many times. "I don't have what it takes. I'm not a pastor. I'm not an evangelist. I'm not a teacher or a preacher or an apostle, and I'm certainly not a miracle-worker." (I don't have it.)

Do you know what Jesus says? (He says two things.) First, (he says), "You're right. You don't have what it takes. (I'm glad you realize it.) On your own, by yourself, if you're serious about what I'm asking you to do with your life, I'm glad it's finally sunk in that you don't have what it takes. You don't."

And then he says, "But that doesn't matter. I don't care what you have or what you don't have. (The truth is, I already know.) All I care about is what you do with what you have, and how, in doing what you do (with what you have) you put your trust in me."

Offer what you have to Jesus, and then watch what happens. Give what you have to Christ, and (it won't be long) and you'll be blown away.

This is exactly the opposite of what we find in the world. In the world, our world tends to devalue small things. (They don't matter. They don't count.) For Jesus, Jesus exalts small things, he lifts them up. The pinch of yeast that leavens the whole loaf. (It doesn't take much for God to do his work.) The woman who gives two

pennies. (Jesus says it's the largest offering of all.) The mustard seed that grows into a large tree, the scrap of bread that ends up feeding an enormous crowd.

On your own, it's never enough. (Jesus says), "I'm glad you realize it. Don't ever forget." But in the hands of Christ, there's always more than enough to go around.

You know, (in closing today), as I think about the sacrifice Jesus made (on the cross) to pay the price for our sin, and about this story of how something so little fed so many, I cannot help but think about what Jesus said (about himself) before he died. (He said), "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a seed. But if it dies (and when it dies), in the ground it bears much fruit."

So it was with the one life Jesus gave for us. So it is that we are all here today with a chance to respond.

"How many loaves do you have?" What will you do with whatever it is that God has given you? It's not the miracle that matters. The point of the story is in the answer to the question Jesus asks. Don't miss the point.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for your invitation to respond in faith to the questions you ask, and to offer what we have, even it seems so small, that in your hands great things might happen.

Lord, we pray for faith, not only to trust you with our lives, but to trust you in our lives, the challenges we face, the situations we encounter, the opportunities we've been given, to give them back to you, with whatever we have to offer, knowing that you will take what we have and it will always be enough.

Lord, help us not to miss what we need to hear, and help us (as we hear it) to never hold back in giving back to you that life you've given to us. In your name we pray. Amen.