

Those Stupid Disciples
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"Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." (John 6:26-27)

This story of the loaves and fishes is very well-known. There are several versions of it in the New Testament, six in fact: two in each of Mark and Matthew, one in Luke, and one here in John. Whether they all describe the same event is not clear. John and Luke present it as a single event. Matthew and Mark present them as two similar, but separate, events. The story is told in much the same way in all four of the Gospels. The crowds follow Jesus around the Sea of Galilee. They stay late. They have no food. The disciples want Jesus to send the people away; Jesus wants to feed them. The disciples can't figure out how that could be possible: the crowd consists of thousands (four or five thousand, depending on the account). Someone has a few loaves and a few fish. Jesus has the people sit down while the disciples distribute the food in baskets. Everyone eats and, miraculously, they are all satisfied. They gather the leftover fragments and everyone is amazed to discover that there are more fragments left over than they started with. This is the only miracle story that appears in all four of the Gospels, so it is worth taking another look at.

John's Gospel has a few added touches. It is the disciple Andrew who brings forward a boy who has five barley loaves and two fish. Another way in which John's account differs is that the people want to come and take Jesus by force to make him king. As a result, Jesus withdraws again into the hills. But they follow him and they meet up with him again on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. It is here that Jesus remarks: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves." Jesus is putting his finger on a problem here: the people don't quite get it. They experience the miracle but they don't understand it: they've got the wrong motivation. This must have been a pernicious problem for Jesus.

Luke also contains only one version of the story, but it is almost word-for-word identical to the versions in Matthew and Mark. The theory is that the writers of both Matthew and Luke were copying from Mark. In Luke's version, as in John's, it says that five thousand are fed. Matthew, however, has two versions, one in chapter 14 and one in chapter 15. At the end of the version in chapter 14, Matthew reports that "those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children," (as if the women and children don't count – they must not have been very hungry! In all fairness to Matthew, the accounts in Luke and John merely use the Greek word "*adres*," which is unclear: it could be referring to five thousand people in general or five thousand males specifically. Matthew is at least clearing things up by mentioning that there were women and children there, even if it sounds like they don't matter.) A few chapters later, after the lapse of a few other episodes, a second version of the story appears. At the end of the second account, Matthew this time reports that "Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women

and children.” (The women and children still must not have been very hungry.) Another difference between the two versions is that in the first version, there are “five loaves and two fish,” with “twelve baskets” left over at the end, while in the second version there are “seven loaves and a few small fish,” with “seven baskets” left over.

It is remarkable that Matthew would have us believe that the disciples could be so oblivious two times in a row like that. They could have at least had an inkling of what Jesus was planning to do. But Matthew seems to have been copying straight from Mark, and just as Mark reports on two episodes as if they have nothing to do with each other, so does Matthew. Mark, however, makes the repetition of the episodes even more stark. In the first episode, in chapter 6, it begins with the disciples coming to Jesus and telling him to send the crowds away. But Jesus tells them to feed the people, and he asks them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” They ask around and then report back that they have five, as well as two fish. Jesus then has the people sit down in groups, and after they have eaten, they gather twelve baskets of leftover pieces. Mark ends by saying that “those who had eaten were five thousand.” (Specifically, five thousand *andres*, but again, it's not clear if this is just males or people in general.) In the second episode, in chapter 8, Jesus starts it off by saying that he has compassion on the crowds, because they have been with him three days and they have nothing to eat, and if he sends them home now, many will faint from hunger along the way. The disciples then naively ask, “How will we be able to feed so many in the wilderness?” Jesus again asks them how many loaves they have. This time, they answer “seven.” Again, Jesus has the people sit on the ground, and after they have all eaten, they gather seven baskets of leftover pieces, and Mark ends the account by specifically telling us that “there were about four thousand.” (This time, that is all that is said: four thousand, it doesn't say four thousand what.)

Mark does not have the same excuse as Matthew for having us believe that the disciples were so dense as to witness the same event a second time without a clue as to what was going on. It is sometimes thought that Mark, too, was copying from a source – in this case, two sources. In one source, five thousand were fed; in the other, four thousand. Mark could have chosen to report them as a single event, but instead chose to work both versions into the narrative. But by doing this, Mark presents the disciples as rather obtuse. They just don't get it. Mark brings this home even more strongly later on in chapter 8. Jesus is with the disciples in a boat. They have forgotten to bring along any food. In fact, there is only one little loaf among them. His response is to tell them, “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” They don't understand, so they start saying to one another, “We have no bread.” Jesus, getting exasperated, asks, “Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?” He then berates them, “You have eyes to see, don't you? And you have ears to hear, don't you? (In the Greek, this is even more clear: Jesus asks the question such that he expects a “yes” answer: I had to retranslate the questions to bring this out.) He then questions them in such a way that they can't help but notice: “You remember, do you not? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” They have to answer, stupidly “Twelve.” Then he asks, “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” And they say to him, “Seven.” And so he says, “And yet you still do not understand?” (as if to say, *how stupid can you get?*)

At one level, the matter is simple. If they had been awake when Jesus had fed the five thousand, they would know that he can turn five loaves into enough food for five thousand, with twelve baskets left over. And if they had somehow missed that, then surely they could not have missed how he fed four thousand from seven loaves, with seven baskets left over. How difficult could it be then to feed thirteen from one little loaf? Surely he has the power to do it again?

And yet that's not what he does. Instead, he talks cryptically about the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod, and they continue their crossing of the sea of Galilee on empty stomachs. *Why are you saying that we have no bread? You numbskulls. You idiots. You blockheads. How much longer must I put up with you?* They still don't get it.

I had a prof at St. Andrew's who used to say – as a joke – that reading the Gospel of Mark isn't a very good thing for disciples to do, i.e. for those of us in the church who are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as disciples of Jesus. The disciples do not come off very well in Mark. Matthew and Luke make for much better reading. But there is another way of understanding Mark that is rather more subtle. Why does Mark put the feeding of the four thousand following the feeding of the five? Wouldn't it make more sense to put it the other way around? And why is Mark so careful about telling us the numbers? First, five thousand are fed on five loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets left over, and then the four thousand are fed on seven loaves and a few small fish, with seven baskets left over. Were the women and children that much more hungry the second time around, or could it be that Jesus' power is somehow getting weaker?

As a matter of fact, this is precisely the pattern that emerges in the Gospel of Mark. In the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus performs many miracles, and everyone is impressed. The crowds throng to him, wanting to be healed. But as time goes by, things get more difficult. His miracles seem to become sparser, the crowds seem to be getting thinner, opposition to him seems to be growing, and the disciples become more and more incomprehending. We can already see signs of this in Mark chapter 8. A crowd of five thousand is replaced by a crowd of four. As soon as Jesus gets out of the boat, the Pharisees come to him, harassing him for a sign. When he tries to heal a blind man, it takes him two tries before he gets it right. When he tells his disciples that it is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things, Peter even rebukes him. After this, the disciples still don't get it. James and John ask to sit in glory at his right and left in the kingdom of God. The others argue among themselves about which of them is the best. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, there is a subtle critique of the superficial understanding of Jesus as the powerful one who works miracles – or at very least, there is a reticence about it.

This aspect of the Gospel is hard to take in. Mark expresses it through exaggerating the obtuseness of the disciples. In fact, I'm not quite sure that Matthew and Luke even get it themselves. John picks up on it in a way, but John is cynical: the people follow Jesus because they ate their fill of bread, not because they understand the signs. And of course, even today this aspect of the Gospel is not what we want to hear.

And yet it resonates. For example, I used to worry about the United Church. The decline of the United Church in institutional terms is measureable. The miracles seem to be

sparcer, the crowds seem to be getting thinner, opposition seems to be growing, we seem to be becoming more and more incomprehending, and we keep asking ourselves why nobody likes us anymore. Where's the magic, what went wrong? We didn't quite realize it at the time, but we used to be so popular! Sometimes it seems like the harder we try, the more fruitless our efforts seem. I don't have the answers. Sometimes I look at some of the decisions that are made and I think we must be as stupid as the disciples of Mark. And yet, at the end of the day, I suspect that the reason why we have so few answers is that we keep asking the wrong questions. We misconstrue the question if we think it is about bolstering the institution. We tend to be more interested in holding on to what we've got rather than following Jesus. And yet trying to follow Jesus is not easy, nor is it always so simple or straight-forward, and sometimes it is not at all clear what we need to do.

And so let us pray,

God of death and life, of beginnings and endings, of deep disappointments and limitless possibilities: we admit that there is so much we do not understand, that we do not comprehend, and yet we ask your blessing upon the ministries of these two congregations. May we hear you call to us, may we ask the right questions, may we follow you, and in following, may we catch a glimmer of understanding. We ask you to bless each member of these two congregations, and all those who participate in the life of the congregations in any way, that we may be nourished in our relationships with one another, and through our relationships with one another, grow into deeper relationship with you. We ask these prayers in the name of the one who leads the way, Jesus the Christ, the bread of life. Amen