

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. ¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." ¹⁶ Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." ¹⁷ "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. ¹⁸ "Bring them here to me," he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

AND LET THESE GIFTS TO US BE BLESSED

Alright, who wants to fall backwards and trust that I will catch them? I don't know why, but this is the faith training exercise I grew up with in the church. And I am assuming you have at least heard if not participating in this faith training exercise as well. Based on my observation, this trust training exercise might better fall under the category of do not put the Lord your God to the test.

At the time of our Gospel today, the twelve disciples of Jesus, had been two years+ into their seminary training with Jesus. Much of this training had been in a classroom type setting, but recently the twelve disciples had some early field experience. Prior to the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus had sent his disciples on a mission trip. Gospel writers Mark and Luke report this mission trip as a great success. Gospel writer Matthew reports on a different mission trip. The report Jesus heard in Matthew was about the beheading of John the Baptist.

Wherever the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered you will find success. You will find believers. Or, wherever the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered you will find suffering. You will find opposition. Have you noticed these outcomes in the church and in your life? How suffering and success are often next door neighbors?

What makes Christians different is Christians trust God to provide, but this child-like faith only reaches adulthood and beyond after some challenging real-life testing. And so let's journey with Jesus and experience the real-life faith testing of the apostles so that we might more confidently live under the truth God provides.

Our Offering

If you were to flip back a couple pages in Matthew's gospel, you would revisit some of the most wonderful words to ever fall from Jesus mouth. Back in chapter 11 Jesus is recorded as saying, "*Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*" (Mt: 11:28-29). Following the news of John the Baptist, Jesus needed some rest too. Compassion fatigue is a real health issue. And what physicians might refer to as good self-care, Jesus practiced himself taught his disciples. Jesus had established healthy boundaries. In his ministry, Jesus would serve for a time and then Jesus would withdraw from serving for a time so that he would find strength to serve. The most memorable when Jesus exercised this kind of spiritual care was in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus entered that Garden overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death and an hour later Jesus was emerged recharged to meet his betrayer and win our salvation.

This is all to say the disciples were not wrong in telling Jesus, "*Send the crowds away.*" Jesus needed rest and the disciples' reasoning was selfless: Listen to this smattering of words in our text: "*evening approached,... remote place ... getting late ... they can go to the village and buy themselves some food.*" This is all very reasonable. What is not reasonable is Jesus telling his disciples, "*You give them something to eat.*" John's Gospel reassures us these words were spoken as a trust training exercise.

Fast-forward an hour or so and the disciples report, "*We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,*" And then Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "*Bring them here to me.*" This quote is unique to Matthew's Gospel. Mark, Luke and John don't include these words so we want to spend some time with them: "*Bring them here to me.*" Why? What's the trust training exercise Jesus wants his disciples and us to learn? And what is it with Jesus and small offerings. In the Old Testament the Lord had directed a widow in Zarephath

to take her last little amount of flour and to make bread for the prophet Elijah to eat. Later in the New Testament, Jesus will reserve his offering praise for a widow who puts two small copper coins in the temple treasury, stating she had given more than all the others. Why is Jesus so insistent on these small offerings that at least to our reasonable eyes won't make much of a difference?

Are not these incidents all about faith training? And what better way to teach the truth God provides than through the activity of taking everything from us. And in the Bible stories I have shared so far, this taking was voluntary. The taking the prophet Job experienced was a violent taking. After the great storm Job famously said, "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away," and isn't that the experience the people living in Winnebago County, Wisconsin are learning today as a result of a tornado last Monday? Thankfully, miraculously, Jesus didn't call anyone home to heaven or to judgment through this tornado, but Jesus did put people through a trust training exercise to trust God will provide.

And God will provide for them because God provides everything. In the Old Testament King David teaches, *"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it."* Later the Apostle Paul will teach how God's grace abounds and multiplies blessings so Christians will know about it in every good work. And here in the text the 12 disciples learned by experience how they could give all they had to the Lord and still leave with more than what they brought!

I suppose Jesus could just say, "Trust me," and we as his people could say, "We promise," but in his grace and mercy Jesus takes his people through this suffering, this faith training exercise, so we can better believe and more confidently live under the truth God provides.

So parents, train your children to give generous offerings from their birthday money. They don't have to give all of their money, but the Lord will not object if they do. And train your children when they get their first employment like dog-sitting to bring an offering to church. I might not think it will make much of a difference, but Jesus in this text wants these offerings as part of a faith-building exercise. And if children can be trusted with a little, then they can be trusted with much when they are adults. If you are receiving thousands of dollars every month and able to spend thousands on travel and home décor, you are able to give thousands of dollars to the Lord. Times of poverty and times of plenty make for great trust training exercises and we show our trust in God to provide when we are generous with offerings. And the same is taught about our service.

Our Service

Did you piece together the command and the apostles' obedience? *"You give them something to eat,"* Jesus commanded in verse 16. And in verse 19, *"Then Jesus gave the loaves and fish to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people."*

I want you to be aware the section headings in your English Bibles except in the Old Testament Book of Psalms are NOT the inspired Word of God. So the section headline in your Bible, "Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand," is NOT the inspired Word of God. A more accurate headline would read, "Jesus and the disciples Feed the Five Thousand". And an even more accurate headline would be, "Jesus is the primary cause for the feeding of the five thousand and the disciples are a secondary cause for the feeding of the five thousand, tied with the personal handling, chewing and digesting of each individual eater."

The point is Jesus wants our service activity. And it won't be long when the disciples handling of bread and fish will be exchanged for the handling of God's Word and sacraments. In the future, the instruction will not be, "You give them something to eat," but rather, "you will be my witness," And the apostles will find success. They will baptize thousands of new believers. And the apostles like John the Baptist will find suffering. All of them except John the Apostle will die as a martyr. And yet in this suffering God provided these martyrs with heaven, the best gift of all.

Today is all about God's providing. Tomorrow, for this crowd, it will be about stewardship. Tomorrow this group will look for another miracle because they don't want to work. They won't get another miracle. God wants us to work and to rest and to manage our blessings, but when we do those things and we find ourselves in a situation where the ends of what we have and what we need don't meet, like 5 loaves and 2 fish and 5,000 people, we can trust God will provide for us because God is good and we have gone through this God will provide, faith training exercise. Amen.