

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & the Multitudes"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 6:30-44
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 23, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to all of you who participated in our Hometown Mission Week! We did good work in our community! Some worked with animals, the Nature Center, or cleanup of Marriott-Slaterville. Some did tutoring work at Pioneer Elementary, and others participated in the Farmer's Market at the Veterans Home. The largest numbers of us were deployed and engaged in some kind of food-based ministry. Many of you have donated food that you've placed in the narthex. Some served meals at the St. Anne's Kitchen at the Lantern House homeless shelter. Some provided a dinner at the Family Promise Center last night. And, a few days this week, we had volunteers working at the Catholic Community Services Joyce Hansen Hall Food Bank.

While I was at the food bank on Tuesday, I learned more about the two programs to help feed school-aged kids over weekends and holidays, when the children don't have access to free breakfasts and lunches at school. One of those programs is "Stop the Gap," which is basically a food pantry set-up in the schools, so that the students can do some free shopping for groceries to take home to their families. The "Stop the Gap" program is provided in those schools where the percentage of impoverished children is so high that it makes sense to provide food for all the students.

In other schools, where a smaller percentage of the students live in poverty, the food bank offers a different program called "Pantry Packs." Since only a small number of those students need food, there's the danger of social stigma. So, the more discreet "Pantry Pack" method is used because those foods, already assembled in a gallon zip lock bag, can easily be slipped into a student's backpack when none of the other kids are watching.

These carefully-strategized ministries of feeding the poor and hungry go well with our gospel reading for today. Ever since the beginning of August, we've been making our way through the Gospel of Mark and reviewing the basics about Jesus. In this "Jesus 101" series, we've already learned about Jesus & the Gospel, Jesus & Healing, Jesus & the Law, Jesus & Vocation, Jesus & Teaching, and Jesus & Water. Today, we're going at this from the angle of "Jesus & the Multitudes."

1—JESUS CARED ABOUT THE MULTITUDES

Those of us familiar with the stories about Jesus know that you can't talk about Jesus very long without getting around to the feeding of the multitudes stories. After all—in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the multiplication of the loaves and fishes occurs six times. The gospel writers thought this miracle was so important that two of them, Matthew and Mark, tell the story twice.

Here in Mark 6, we see that Jesus fed a crowd of 5000. In the second telling, in Mark 8, the crowd of 5000 is reduced to 4000, but the idea is the same. Jesus had been teaching a very large group of people. The numbers refer to the men in the crowd. If you assume that they had wives and children with them, then the numbers could easily be doubled or tripled or more. The point isn't an exact count, however. The gospel writers were simply trying to communicate that there were very, very large groups of people who came to see and hear Jesus. Eventually, they were all getting hungry, and Jesus, in his compassion, wanted to do something about that.

Jesus' disciples suggested that he send the people away to the surrounding villages to buy something for themselves to eat. But Jesus had a different idea. Jesus asked them what resources they had on hand. The disciples determined that they had five loaves and two fish. The miracle, as we know, is that Jesus was able to feed so many people with such a small amount of food. How did he do that, we wonder?

Some Christians believe that this miracle story happened just like it says. The disciples rounded up five loaves of bread and two dried fish, and they divided up the people into groups of 50 and 100. Jesus

then blessed the food, and the disciples distributed it through the crowd so that everyone there ate their fill. And, when all was done, there were 12 full baskets of leftover pieces. Christians who hold this point of view believe that God, and God's Son Jesus, were and are capable of doing amazing and otherwise impossible things. They say that the reason this story and its variations occur six times in the gospels is that this event was of huge importance as both a spiritual and historical event.

Other Christians doubt that the miraculous feeding happened exactly like that. Some of them consider this story of bread and fish to be symbolic of the bread and wine which are shared in the Eucharistic meal. As we break one communion loaf and distribute it to a whole congregation of people, we satisfy our spiritual hunger for a closer relationship with Christ.

Other Christians see in this story of the miraculous feeding a promise of the heavenly feast which awaits us at the end of time. No one will ever go hungry in those mansions which have been prepared for us in glory. When we all get to heaven, what a day of satisfaction that will be!

Still other Christians understand the feeding of the 5000 to be a story about sharing what we have with others. These faithful people believe that, as the disciples started passing around the five loaves and two fish, persons in the crowd followed their example and began pulling food out of their pockets and satchels. People had actually come more prepared than the disciples thought. As everyone shared what they had, there turned out to be more than enough food for the big crowd.

Maybe you agree with one of these interpretations, or, if you're like me, maybe you can see some truth in all of them. Whatever we make of the story, though, there's one thing that's for sure. The miracle of the feeding began because Jesus saw the multitudes and had compassion on them.

2—YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

Jesus' compassionate heart was the beginning of the miracle. The second part included Jesus' disciples. In Mark 6:37, Jesus told them, "You give them something to eat." No matter what else we believe happened between Jesus and the multitudes, we can be sure that Jesus called on his disciples to

make this miracle happen. The disciples were probably tired, and their ideas were limited to what would be easier for themselves. But Jesus' compassion for the multitudes overcame his own discomforts, and he wanted his disciples to learn that they could do more than they thought.

We can't read this story without conviction that Jesus' words still apply today. Wherever there are multitudes of people in need, Jesus tells us, his followers, that we should do our part. It doesn't matter if we're tired. It doesn't matter if we don't think we have enough resources. And we can't assume that the needy throngs are someone else's responsibility. We must obey the orders given to us by Jesus when he said, "You give them something to eat."

When I was at the food bank on Tuesday, Ellen Fowers was there volunteering with me. When she learned about the two school programs to assist hungry children over the weekends, Ellen kept saying how surprised she was that so many children would be in need. She reflected, with gratitude, that her parents were able to provide well for her. Ellen also noted how important it is for us who are well-off to volunteer in places like the food bank, so we can be exposed to the great need that is out there.

On Wednesday, I didn't do any of our scheduled Hometown Mission Week projects. But I did attend two meetings. At noon, the Coalition of Religious Communities (CORC, for short) met to talk about our diaper drive and our efforts to end child homelessness. This fall, we're focusing especially on how domestic violence causes children to become homeless. That's why we'll be taking our collected diapers to YCC—the domestic violence shelter. Anything we can do to ease the suffering of homeless parents and their children will be one step in the right direction toward housing stability.

Later on Wednesday afternoon, I attended a meeting of the Weber County Local Homelessness Coordinating Council. That's a mouthful, isn't it? That group coordinates the efforts of all the various agencies that work with the homeless. They wanted to have a representative from the faith community on their board, so they were glad to have me come. What I heard there is that there simply aren't enough units of affordable housing available. When it costs more than \$1000/month to rent a very small

apartment, what homeless family can afford that? The Lantern House representatives told us that they are currently housing 73 families with children. Another several families are sleeping in the Family Promise churches and day shelter. And a representative from the Ogden School District told the group that they currently have 854 students who are considered homeless because they live in a homeless shelter, a car, or a motel; they couch surf with various friends; or their families are doubled or tripled up with other relatives. When the Weber County Commissioner heard that number of 854, he asked twice to have it repeated. He couldn't believe his ears.

The multitudes are out there. Mark 6:34 tells us that Jesus saw them and had compassion on them. But Jesus didn't fix their problems all by himself. He told his disciples, "You give them something to eat."

CONCLUSION

On Monday night at the Lantern House, our FUMC Hometown Mission Week team served up egg noodles with either tomato and beef sauce or Salisbury steak in mushroom gravy. The Salisbury steak was made out of wild elk meat which had been donated by hunters. I thought that was rather exotic, and most of us were surprised how many of the guests made that choice.

Thinking of a big elk made me remember that saying, "How do you eat an elephant?" Do you know the answer? You eat an elephant "one bite at a time."

Solving the problem of the needy multitudes seems like such a huge job that it would be impossible. But we begin like Jesus, by seeing the multitudes and feeling compassion for them. Then we break down the problem the same way Jesus told the disciples to divide up the 5000 into smaller groups of 50 and 100. Somehow then the task wasn't so intimidating or difficult. In other words, we don't have to try to feed or house them all. We just need to do all that we possibly can. So we advocate for the poor with decision-making groups, we donate our time and our money, and we bring some diapers for the children who have lost their homes due to domestic violence. That's how we follow the lead of Jesus and the multitudes.