

Elon Community Church
July 26, 2009

What's For Dinner?
By Ray Pollard based on John 6:1-15

Introduction

The story we know as "the feeding of the 5000" is one of the most familiar in the New Testament. We usually tell it with a blending of different parts of all four versions, but as we know it Jesus had been teaching a large group of people who followed him to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The people seem to have left their homes early to walk some miles to where they found him, eager to hear his words and perhaps see some miracle like those they had been hearing about.

To make a beautiful little story a bit shorter, toward the close of the day a problem began to become clear.

5,000 men, plus women and children....

...a long day on foot and in the out-of-doors....

...Women of the church, what do you suppose those 5,000 hungry men were asking? You got it...."what's for dinner?"

You remember the rest. The disciples would have sent the people away to the villages and countryside to buy food, but Jesus challenged them, "You feed them." The disciples reminded Jesus that would require about 8 months wages just get a meager meal for this crowd. And so the "five loaves and two fish" became the raw material of a miracle of compassion as Jesus fed the multitude, with plenty left over.

Let's think about this story for a while this morning. This is one of the few stories about Jesus that appears in all four of the New Testament gospel accounts of his life. What was it about this story that made it important for all the gospel writers to include it?

Was it just because it was a miracle, a wonder, an amazing occurrence? There were many other such miracle stories that aren't included. There must be something else.

Personally, I think it was because this little account captured so completely what Jesus' whole ministry was about. There is so much more here than just sharing bread and fish with a crowd. If that were all there was to it we would just have a one-time event from the distant past that is interesting but no longer of significance.

To be sure it has inspired hunger relief programs such as "Loaves & Fishes," but there is something more basic here.

To my knowledge few of you in this room have nothing at home to eat. Does that mean this story has no meaning for you. Oh, I think it does.

What I see here is a message that Jesus has something to offer that speaks to the deepest hunger of the human soul. On that day it was a hunger for truth that brought the crowds to hear Jesus. The sharing of food was but a gesture of grace that speaks to a deeper hunger in the hearts of the people.

The larger message is a God of generous love who wishes to offer hope and help to whatever emerges as the hunger of your heart.

What I see in so many people today is a hunger for something that would heal the brokenness of our world....all the things we have come up with to divide us, to put one against another in a win/lose situation.

Just think of some of the things we have come up with to do that....

- Rich/poor
- Liberal/conservative
- Pro life/pro choice
- Gay/Straight
- Support Israel/support the Palestinians
- Stay in Iraq/get out of Iraq
- Red states/Blue states
- Inner city and suburban dwellers
- Urban and rural values and life-styles
- Denominational labels

We are pulled and pushed by friends and neighbors and co-workers and action groups to join one side or the other of these divisions, and we are viewed with great suspicion when we don't declare our position as they want us to. The result is often bitterness and conflict. It shows up in mean-spirited rhetoric and cold, harsh words hurled at those who see life issues differently.

Jesus offered his world something for their hunger for peace and healing....and it is all tied up in a word called "Grace." And the implication is about God's people living graciously.

Let me illustrate it this way of grace with another biblical story you will recognize.

Jesus told the now famous story of the Good Samaritan. He described how the Priest and the Levite, the worship leaders of the Hebrew people, passed by without helping the injured man by the side of the road. Then Jesus shocked his audience by telling of a Samaritan who rescued the man and saw to his care. Now, Jesus' hearers could hardly think of any way a Samaritan could be thought of as "good."

The Jewish people of that day saw Samaritans as idolaters, faithless to God and doomed to hell. Jesus not only indicated in his story that they were the examples of neighbors, but that they were actually capable of living more graciously than the pious Jews who taught their children to hate Samaritans. Right here is where the story begins to speak its message.

The lawyer in the story who started all this discussion shared his conviction of the essence of his religion when he quoted the wonderful, ancient words, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,*" and "*love your neighbor as yourself.*" And the lawyer pressed Jesus further – was he looking for a loophole out of this challenging truth? – "Who is my neighbor?"

How would you have answered the lawyer when he asked, "*Who is my neighbor?*" We usually begin to identify the neighbor with the kind of person represented by the wounded victim.... our "neighbor" becomes the person who lives next door, or the person who is ill to whom we feel we must take a casserole, or maybe the dying or someone who is in need.

But that is not the way Jesus answered the question of the lawyer. **Henri Nouwen** put it this way. *“The neighbor, Jesus makes clear, is not the poor man lying on the side of the road, stripped, beaten, and half dead, but the Samaritan who crossed the road, ‘bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them...lifted him onto his own mount and took him to an inn and looked after him.’ My neighbor is the one who crosses the road for me!”*

The neighbor is the one who lives graciously.... the one who overcomes the hate and prejudice and misunderstanding of others and lives the spirit of love and grace. It was here that Jesus challenged the lawyer to be a neighbor. Quit worrying about how “un-neighborly” others can be, and be a neighbor to all people.

The Samaritan was the neighbor, and gained Jesus’ praise because he lived more graciously than the others who passed by and ignored a wounded traveler.

And in today’s text, it is not so much the hungry multitude that is the point of this story. It is the disciples whom Jesus directed to become the feeders of the hungry, to be neighbors to those who had come to hear the Master.

II

It is that spirit of living graciously that I want to point out to you today. That is the way we can lay to rest some of the vicious and hurtful divisions that separate so many in our world, indeed, in our communities and churches and families. This is one way God can speak to the hunger of our world for peace and harmony!

I think that is what the gospel writers were getting at in recalling this story of the feeding of the multitude. In turning to his disciples and charging them to feed the many he was charging his people to be those people in whom others can learn the grace of God as they see people living graciously toward others.

I am reminded of the story of a little boy who was afraid of the dark. He was afraid of the monsters he thought lived under his bed and in his closet. His parents would pray with him each night and ask God to protect him, but he would always end up in their bed.

“One night his father said, ‘you don’t have to be afraid. God will be here in your room with you.

“The little boy answered, ‘I was hoping for someone with skin on.’”

[Gulley & Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, p.

145]

The only way our world is going to be much different is for enough people to become people “with skin on,” those who are willing to personally embody the spirit of gracious living. I hear God speaking to the people of God, “you feed them.”

What is gracious living? Basically I am talking about living out the kind of grace with which God has dealt with each of us....grace that is freely given, even when we have not deserved it or sought it. It is passing on the gift of grace.

Let me glean three clues from this passage as we struggle with this question about how to live in a healing, merciful, gracious way.

First, it means focusing on the needs of others rather than what they look like to our pre-conditioned eyes, or whether they agree with us on every issue we confront.

A priest and a Levite saw an inconvenience as they journeyed down that road. To have touched him would have disqualified them for their place in worship and they couldn't be bothered. They saw a wounded man as a threat to their rules, their religious ceremonies and their positions of authority.

A Samaritan saw a fellow human being, wounded and suffering and in need of care, and he knew that was more important than the rules for religious activities.

On more than one occasion Jesus made it clear that God was much more interested in justice, mercy and humility than in rituals and sacrifices and rules and doctrines and labels.

You will have to explore whom it is we refuse to see compassionately in our world. Living graciously will shut no one out of love and grace.

Second, it means looking for the best in others rather than focusing on their faults.

Our job in the church is not to tell folks how bad they are, but to point them to the grace of God who loves them.

Most of us are quite aware of our shortcomings, our failures, our sins. And a great many people have assumed that they are disqualified from God's love because of what they have done with their lives.

Our mission as followers of Christ is surely to share the good news of the value of all God's people! When Jesus gathered a band of disciples, just think of the folks he chose! Ordinary watermen, a scheming tax gatherer, an impulsive and quick-tempered man, and some who never did much of a spectacular nature. But he saw in them value and worth.

I love that passage from Philippians: *"...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."*

Can you imagine what this world might look like if we spent as much time looking for the best in others and praising, magnifying those things rather than criticizing and belittling them?

Most of all, gracious living means looking to the example and the spirit of Jesus as we enter into contact with people every day. We are to be people of grace...”living graciously” with people who may not appreciate it or seek it or even notice.

Be honest now. Most of don't spend much time each day dealing with other people the way Jesus interacted with people in his world. Someone wrongs us and we want to get even, or perhaps just avoid that person.

Let them get caught in their wrong and we take delight in seeing them punished or suffering some humiliation.

Is that the way Jesus responded to people whose lives had gone astray? Hardly. He sat down to eat with 'sinners,' touched lepers, spent time with afflicted people, and loved them.

And that is the only way we can understand how we ought to deal with each other. It is the only way we can really help them.

I think back over more than 50 years of ministering in and around churches, and I can think of some remarkable times when people who had been broken by grief, or nearly destroyed by foolish living, or shattered by the hard blows of life, found in a community of faith a healing hand, an acceptance and a willingness to help, and I have seen their lives remade.

I wish you could know our friend Debbie. She came to our church in Richmond twenty-five years ago, a broken person. Fresh out of a divorce, with two young children, battered by hard experiences and emotionally empty. She tells us what it meant to come and find that we had a Sunday School class for people in her situation. She plugged in, found great meaning, stability and strength in the encouragement of the others who understood her needs.

It turned out that she was a person of considerable intelligence, skill and training. She was in management in the business world and respected there. She was a Christian of great faith, though it had been hard for her to cope with all that life had thrown her way. She needed the personal touch of grace that could bring her through that time of trial.

Now twenty-five years later, remarried and happy, with great insights into the grace of God that transforms human life, a grace that is best communicated through the touch of people who are living graciously like Samaritans.

Gracious living can work miracles in the lives of those who need it most.

III

In all honesty, I must add here that there is a cost attached to what I am sharing this morning.

Just try living out the spirit of that passage about *“loving your neighbor as yourself,”* and try challenging others to do the same. Try calling on a chaotic world to live graciously! Try offering the banquet of God’s grace to people who are skeptical and resistant. You will see the reaction.

Some will call you an idealistic dreamer. Others will look with scorn on because you refuse to practice judgment on one sin or another that they find offensive. You will find yourself the subject of ridicule and opposition by well meaning people, some of whom have been your friends. Some will take advantage of your kindness.

The One who lived this gracious love of God most fully was Jesus, and you know what happened to him! He was despised, rejected, and accused by those who did not want to live graciously. And in the end, he was crucified by those who could not accept his kind of grace.

But Jesus was willing to suffer those indignities because his way was God’s way. It was the right way to live. He saw so many people desperate to find love and acceptance but who could not find it in the religions of their world. They could not find it in the governments or the society at large.

Jesus came and lived out this love for all those with whom he came in contact. And he calls us to do the same.

Unfortunately many who need this gracious touch of God won’t come to the churches because they don’t expect to find a gracious God here. They expect condemnation and rejection, but it can happen.

So we will have to take that way of life and go out to those who need it most. It will take ordinary folks like you and me who will find the hungry and needy, like disciples facing 5,000, or Samaritans along the road of daily experience, and do our best to give them hope.

And, I would add, with the deepest hunger of your life, you may be asking, “What’s for dinner?” Where is hope for me with my inner longings? Where is healing for the brokenness of my life.

God has prepared a banquet of grace. And he offers it through gracious people. Would you be one?