

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Feeding of the Nine Thousand (or Food Stamps and Faith)**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 14:13-21, 15:29-39

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

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We come this morning to two of the best known and best loved stories in the Bible—the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000, found in two successive chapters of Matthew. Thus the title of my sermon, but I could just as well have called it “The Feeding of the Twenty-seven Thousand,” because in both stories Matthew goes out of his way to tell us that he was only counting the men. If half the men’s wives were with them, and if the average couple had 3 children, there could have been 27,000 people present! Regardless of the number present, the miracle was stupendous!

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only one of Jesus' miracles recorded in all four Gospels and it is the miracle most often referred to in other NT passages. The feeding of the 4,000 is recorded only in Matthew and Mark. Before we examine the point and purpose of these miracles, I want us to wrestle briefly with some difficult questions raised by the fact that two miracles so much alike are recorded in such close proximity.

How do we deal with the similarities and differences between these two miracles stories?

(Matthew 14:13-21; 15:29-39)

Some scholars suggest that Matthew got mixed up and told the same tale twice, recording different and even contradictory details. But we should remember that Matthew was a former tax collector and was used to keeping accurate records, so that explanation doesn’t seem to hold up. His accounts are different, I believe, because they record two separate historical events.

The background for the feeding of the 5,000 is actually a tragic incident in the life of Jesus. His cousin John, often called the Baptizer, whom God had given the privilege and responsibility of announcing Jesus as the coming Messiah, had just been murdered by King Herod. We studied that event back in early December because it completed the story of John as found in chapter 11, but it would do us well to read it again, Matthew 14:3-12:

Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet.

On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

Now let's continue the story in verse 13, noting the connection with the feeding of the 5,000:

When Jesus heard what had happened (to John), he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

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."

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

"Bring them here to me," he said. 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. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Please turn over to the next chapter and let's read the story of the Feeding of the 4,000 from Matthew 15:29-39. We don't know how much time had passed between these two incidents, but perhaps as much as several months.

Jesus left there (referring to the region of Tyre and Sidon) and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."

He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was four thousand, besides women and children. After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

The similarities between these two miracles stories are obvious, but I want to note for you some of the differences. The most obvious are the number of men present (5000/4000), how long they had gone without food (less than a day/three days), the number of loaves and fish Jesus was provided (5 and 2/7 and several), and the amount of food that was left over (12 basketfuls/7 basketfuls).

But there are other differences as well. The earlier incident happened in Jewish territory near the

northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee. The second incident, according to the Gospel of Mark (7:31), occurred in Gentile territory further south near the ten cities called The Decapolis. The Jewish people who were healed in the first incident were eager to crown Jesus as their political Messiah. The Gentiles in the second responded by praising the God of Israel.¹

But clearly the strongest evidence that these were two separate, historical feeding miracles is that Jesus specifically says so. In Matthew 16:9-10 He asks His disciples, “Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?”

The most difficult question we can ask about these two miracles is undoubtedly this: “Why would the disciples fail to remember the earlier incident when this one occurs just weeks or at most a few months later? How could they *not* remember what Jesus and done (and be so clueless as to not expect Him to do it again?”). I think the best answer is to simply turn the question back on ourselves and ask, “How often do we face a crisis in our own lives and choose to worry and stew over it, while giving little or no thought to the fact that God took us through a similar crisis a few weeks or months ago and can readily do it again?” This is just human nature—we forget what we should remember and remember what we should forget.

Now I’m going to assume most of our audience here this morning is ready and willing to accept both accounts as historic and authentic. Far more important, then, is the question, “What is it that Jesus is trying to communicate through the feeding of the multitudes?” I want to begin with this proposition:

Jesus provides food in order to teach faith. (Matthew 14:13-21)

Since I believe Jesus uses both of these events for the same general purpose, I’m going to camp on the Matthew 14 incident, the feeding of the 5,000. In verse 13 we read that “When Jesus heard what had happened (to John), he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” Jesus isn’t running from danger; rather I believe He desires to grieve the death of His dear friend, and sometimes a solitary place is needed to process grief. But I suspect He and His disciples also need a furlough. They’ve been going 24/7 for some time now. They are constantly being hounded by people seeking healing—so much so that they don’t even have time to eat. The exhausted interns have had it with people for a while. They would like to do a little fishing and a lot of sleeping. A vacation or sabbatical on the isolated eastern shore seems an ideal solution.

But despite His own need for time to process His grief, and His disciples’ legitimate need for rest and recuperation, Jesus feels compassion on the multitude, and He welcomes them and heals their diseases. As the day drags on the disciples raise two issues to Jesus’ attention: 1) the place is remote, and 2) it’s getting late. They suggest that He send the people away so they can go to the nearest town and buy some food. (I suspect in the back of their minds is the desire for some peace and quiet for themselves as well).

Now if you wonder how so many people would have allowed themselves to walk at least ten

miles from home without taking sufficient food, I would suggest to you that most of them hadn't planned this trip—they just got caught up in the excitement and dropped whatever they were doing when they heard that the miracle worker was over near Bethsaida. The time got away from them and before they knew it the day was nearly gone. This really more like human nature than you may realize.

The summer before I got married three buddies and I decided to take a ten-day trip out west. One of our stops was at the Grand Canyon. When we arrived it was early afternoon of a very hot August day and we saw this path going down from the rim. We decided to do a little hiking. The further we walked, the more amazing the scenery became, so we just kept on walking. We didn't have any backpacks, no food, no flashlights, and only two canteens, but the excitement of seeing the incredible side canyons and other amazing sights caused us to lose all sense of perspective, and in 3 or 4 hours we got to the Colorado River, crossed the little swinging bridge, and showed up at the ranch at the bottom of the canyon. We thought surely we could get something to eat there and perhaps even stay overnight. It didn't cross our minds that you have to get reservations at the ranch about a year in advance.

Well, gratefully they sold us four sack lunches but there were no accommodations. By then it was nearly dark. Our legs ached and, though we were young and in fairly good shape, we were exhausted. We just lay in the little stream between the ranch and the river. One guy had tennis shoes with no socks, and all of us had blisters, but we had no choice but to start hiking out. We were told the Bright Angel trail was less steep than the South Kaibab which we had taken down, so we decided to go that way, even though it was 3 or 4 miles longer. I'll spare you the details but simply say that thanks to a full moon we were able to walk out without a flashlight, emerging from the canyon about 2:00 in the morning, having walked a total of 18 miles of steep mountain trails. It was easily the most exhausted I have ever been in my life. Nothing even runs a close second. I share the story only as an illustration of how people can do strange things with little or no planning *if* they are fascinated by something, and *if* they have friends urging them on. This crowd experienced both.

Jesus sees this as a teachable moment for everyone, especially His disciples—an opportunity to stretch their faith. So He tells His disciples in verse 16, “You give them something to eat.” The term “you” is in the emphatic position in the sentence, and it in effect means, “Don't send them away to get something to eat. *You* feed them.” The suggestion must have shocked the disciples. We learn in the other Gospel accounts that one of the disciples, Philip, answered him incredulously, “Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!” (John 6:7). To put it in a more modern context, if Taco Bell were to cater this meal (that's about the cheapest place I know to eat) and were only to charge \$4 per person, you'd be talking about a cost of at least \$50,000! The disciples have calculated correctly, of course. This is an impossible situation, unless, of course, they take into consideration the Incalculable Christ.

But before we rebuke the disciples for their lack of faith, let each of us ask ourselves, "What would I have done under similar circumstances?" Or better, "What *have* I done under similar circumstances? How often have I failed to consider an impossible situation as a disguised

opportunity for God to demonstrate His power?"

In the Gospel of John (6:8) we are told that Andrew finds a lad with a brown bag lunch and brings the five loaves and two fish to Jesus. Before giving too much credit to Andrew we should note that he judges the lunch totally inadequate, asking, "How far will they go among so many?" Jesus, however, orders the disciples to have the people sit down on a grassy knoll, and then takes the lad's lunch, gives thanks for it (showing His reliance upon His Father for extraordinary power), and distributes it by means of His disciples. We don't know exactly how this miracle occurred, but I suspect it happened in the hands of Jesus.ⁱⁱ

But we do know the results—all eat and are fully satisfied. Not only that, but leftovers are collected. In fact, twelve basketfuls are collected—perhaps one for each disciple, the waiters receiving their tips.

There is little doubt that this incident, as well as the feeding in chapter 15, was designed to generate faith in the multitudes, and especially in the disciples. Jesus is Lord of creation. He is not only able to heal disease—correcting that which sin has destroyed—but He can also create that which doesn't even exist yet—sufficient food for thousands. I believe it's no accident that this became the most popular of Jesus' miracles, with the loaves and fishes appearing frequently in the art of the early church. The people remembered that God had fed His people with manna and quail from heaven in Moses' day. They remembered how Elijah filled the widow's jar with grain and her jug with oil. They remembered how Elisha fed 100 men with just 20 cakes and had leftovers.

Now Jesus has done something even more astounding than all of those miracles. There can be no doubt in any objective observer that a unique display of divine power has been demonstrated.

Can they trust Him to meet their needs?

Is He reliable?

Is He sufficient?

Is He the God of the impossible?

The *food* was a means to the *faith* Jesus desired to inculcate in them. But sadly, .

The multitude is attracted to Jesus by the food but misses the point of the faith. (John 6:26)

I want us to turn to the Gospel of John, chapter 6. As he often does, John provides more of the theological understanding behind events in Jesus' life. It's the next day after the Feeding of the 5,000 and the crowd has caught up with Jesus again. They are begging for autographs and everyone is jockeying to have his picture taken with Jesus. But He chides them (verse 26), "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill." Faith which rests on miracles is not the highest kind of faith, but these people don't even exhibit that minimal kind of faith; they are crass materialists. They apparently want to quit work and let Jesus turn water to wine, feed them miraculously, and heal them whenever they get sick. They are moved not by full hearts but by full bellies. They are

after Kingdom Food Stamps. They want Messianic Medicare and Medicaid. They desire the benefits Jesus has to offer but want nothing of the discipleship He demands.

We see this same tendency in the health/wealth theology of many of modern media preachers. But do we see it in ourselves as well? When we want comfort in sorrow, strength in difficulty, peace in turmoil, help in face of depression, there is no one so wonderful as Jesus. But when He comes to us calling for some personal sacrifice, or some challenge to meet, or some cross to bear, we have more important things to occupy our attention. When we honestly examine our hearts we find that too often we love Jesus primarily for what we can get out of Him.

The multitude and the disciples have both failed to appreciate the purpose for which Jesus performed the great miracle of the Feeding of the 5,000—i.e. to generate faith. So, thirdly, He speaks bluntly to them.

Jesus puts food and faith in proper perspective. John 6:26-29

The only food worth working for is spiritual food. Again I read from John 6:26-29:

"I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

When Jesus tells them not to work for the food that perishes, I don't think He means that one shouldn't work for a living. Elsewhere in the NT we are told that "if a man will not work he shall not eat." He is using a Hebrew figure of speech to set up a contrast in priorities. What He means is that our chief goal and purpose in life must not be simply to satisfy our physical and emotional and psychological needs and desires. Sure, a man must work to meet those needs, but he must not work exclusively or even primarily to meet those needs.

But how many professing Christians, to say nothing of unbelievers, are doing just that! There are many who, while ignoring the deepest spiritual needs of their families and even their own lives, devote themselves almost exclusively to material pursuits. One of the saddest things to me is to see a home break up and then hear the husband say, "I can't understand what she wanted—I worked 70 hours a week until I reached the top of my field and now that I'm financially secure she tells me to take a walk." Or worse yet to hear a parent say, "I can't understand what happened to my child—I gave him everything a child could want. I didn't enjoy being out of town so much, but you can't live in that neighborhood and send kids to that school for peanuts." Probably in both cases the wife and the child would gladly have traded the luxuries provided for a greater share of Dad's time.

But it is not just in our personal lives that we tend to work for food that spoils; we do it also in our worship. Tens of thousands today are flocking to churches that focus on "felt needs," not

Bible and sound theology. People change churches sometimes with no more thought than they give to changing grocery stores or gas stations. If the entertainment is better somewhere else, if the sermon is shorter, and if the coffee is Starbucks, they're "outta here." Michael Horton, in a book entitled, *Made in America: The Shaping of Modern Evangelicalism*, takes John 6:26 and paraphrases it as follows: "You are not converts, but consumers. You're like stray cats that follow, not out of any attachment to a new owner, but because they remember who fed them last."

In contrast to the strong tendency of the human heart to work for food that spoils, Jesus urges us to seek the food that endures to eternal life, that is, spiritual food, starting with a personal relationship with Him.

Now Jesus adds a second very important truth:

The only work God accepts is the work of faith. As was so very often the case, the Jews miss the point of what Jesus is saying (in verse 27). They hear the word "work" and immediately want to know what they must do. Verse 28: "What must we *do* to *do* the works God requires?" One of the strongest tendencies of the human heart is to do something for our salvation. The rich young ruler said to Jesus, "Good Master, what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" The Philippian jailer likewise said, "Sirs, what must I *do* to be saved? The human mind is always flattered when it is conscious of doing something for God. But the essence of Christianity is this: it is not what we can do for God but rather what God has already done for us. I don't believe there is a single religion anywhere apart from biblical Christianity which teaches that salvation is a gift that cannot be earned. But that is exactly what Jesus says in verse 27: "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will *give* you." The food that endures is a gift Christ gives to the one who deeply desires it.

But then in verse 29 Jesus seems to condescend to the level of His questioners, as He says in effect: "If you think you have to do something, I'll explain what kind of work is required. The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." The only thing Jesus changes in their question is the term "works." They ask about works in the plural; Jesus tells them about work in the singular. There is only one acceptable work—the work of faith. Of course, the only sense in which believing or faith is a work is that it is not passive. No one becomes a believer by osmosis, nor is it a matter of simply acquiescing to certain facts. Rather biblical faith is making an active decision of one's will to put one's faith and trust in Christ.

William R. Newell was a great preacher early in the 20th century, best known today perhaps as the author of the hymn *At Calvary*. He tells a story that communicates so well the fact that the only work God accepts is the work of faith.

Years ago in the city of St. Louis, I was holding noon meetings in the Century Theatre. One day I spoke on this verse—Romans 4:5. "To him that worketh not, but believeth in him who justifieth the ungodly; his faith is reckoned unto him (counted) for righteousness." After the audience had gone, I was addressed by a fine looking man of middle age who had been waiting alone in a box seat for me.

He immediately said, "I am Captain G---," (I abbreviate his name; he was a man very widely known in the city): And when I sat down to talk with him, he began: "You are speaking to the most ungodly man in St. Louis."

I said "Thank God!"

"What!" he cried. "Do you mean you are glad that I am wicked?"

"No," I said, "but I am certainly glad to find a sinner that knows he is a sinner."

"Oh, you do not know the half! I have been absolutely ungodly for year and years and years, right here in St. Louis. I own two Mississippi steamers. Everybody knows me. I am just the most ungodly man in town!"

I could hardly get him quiet enough to ask him: "Did you hear me preach on 'ungodly people' today?"

"Mr. Newell," he said, "I have been coming to these noon meetings for six weeks. I do not think I have missed a meeting. But I cannot tell you a word of what you said today. I did not sleep last night. I have hardly had any sleep for three weeks. I have gone to one man after another to find out what I should do. And I do what they say. I have read the Bible. I have prayed. I have given money away. But I am the most ungodly wretch in this town. Now what do you tell me to do? I waited here today to ask you that. I have tried everything; but I am so ungodly!"

"Now," I said, "we will turn to the verse I preached on." I gave the Bible into his hands, asking him to read aloud:

"To him that worketh not." "But," he cried, "how can this be for me? I am the most ungodly man in St. Louis."

"Wait," I said, "I beg you to go on reading."

So he read, "To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly." "There!" he fairly shouted, "that's what I am--ungodly."

"Then, this verse is about you," I assured him.

"But please tell me what to do, Mr. Newell. I know I am ungodly; what shall I do?"

"Read the verse again, please."

He read: "To him that worketh not"--and I stopped him.

"There," I said, "the verse says not to do, and you want me to tell you something to do; I cannot do that."

"But there must be something to do; if not I shall be lost forever." "Now listen with all your soul," I said. "There was something to do, but it has been done!" Then I told him how that God had so loved him, all ungodly as he was, that He sent Christ to die for the ungodly. And that God's judgment had fallen on Christ who had been forsaken of God for his, Capt. G's sins, there on the cross. Then, I said, "God raised up Christ; and sent us preachers to beseech men, all ungodly as they are, to believe on this God who declares righteous the ungodly, on the ground of Christ's shed blood."

He suddenly leaped to his feet and stretched out his hand to me. "Mr. Newell," he said, "I will accept that proposition!" And off he went without another word.

Next noon day at the opening of the meeting, I saw him beckoning to me from the wings of the stage. I went to him. "May I say a word to these people?" he asked. I saw his shining face, and gladly brought him in.

I said to the great audience, "Friends, this is Capt. G, whom most, if not all of

you, know. He wants to say a word to you."

"I want to tell you all of the greatest proposition I ever found," he cried. "I am a business man and know a good proposition. But I found one yesterday that so filled me with joy, that I could not sleep a wink all night. I found out that God, for Jesus Christ's sake, declares righteous any ungodly man that trusts Him. I trusted Him yesterday; and you all know what an ungodly man I was. I thank you all for listening to me; but I felt I could not help but tell you this wonderful proposition; that God should count me righteous."ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, the only work God accepts is the work of faith in His one and only Son.

Now if we had time to go further in John 6 we would find that Jesus uses the opportunity provided by this dialogue over food that spoils and food that endures to deliver one of his most unpopular sermons ever, one in which He claimed to be the Bread from Heaven (John 6:35-59). While we don't even have time to read the sermon this morning, I want you to notice the impact it had in verse 66:

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Conclusion: Friend, what are you looking for today? Are you looking for a crisis manager, a trump card when the game of life swings against you, a food stamp outlet? Or are you looking for a Savior? Are you caught up in the consumer mentality when you come to church, hoping the musicians can stir your emotions and the pastor challenge your intellect? Are you working for food that spoils rather than for that which endures to eternal life?

Let's all take a moment to examine our own hearts before God. Perhaps we need to recommit ourselves to Jesus in true discipleship. Perhaps some need to receive Him as Savior for the very first time.

Prayer: Father, help us to come to grips with the fact that we are not selling a product to consumers, but proclaiming a Savior to sinners. The Bread from Heaven has come down to provide us the food that endures to eternal life. May we accept that bread, feast on it, and grow from it. Amen.

i. An interesting piece of evidence of the authenticity of Matthew's record is found in his use of the term "baskets" in both stories. In the former story he uses a word referring to a small Jewish container used by an individual when traveling to carry food for one or two meals. It was a lunch bucket, or at most a knapsack in today's lingo. However, he uses a different word in the second incident—one that refers to a distinctly Gentile basket that was quite large. Such a basket was used to lower Paul over the wall in Damascus (Acts 9:25). Therefore these seven large

baskets undoubtedly held considerably more food than the twelve baskets in the previous account.

ii. William Barclay, who at times seems so reluctant to accept Scripture at face value, suggests that the miracle may have been that as people saw the little boy give up his lunch, they all brought out their own brown bags which they were hiding. The real miracle, then, was that one act of selflessness generated a great deal of generosity. (If anything it's a miracle how far human ingenuity will go to eliminate the supernatural from a Bible story).

iii. W. R. Newell quoted in Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans*, Vol. II, 234.