

The Who and the Why

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There is a boy here who has five loaves and two fish, but what are they among so many people. When they were satisfied He told His disciples, “gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's been a year now, so I guess I can talk about it. I'm not sure there is any formal statute of limitations, but to be honest, sometimes it takes a year to process a life-changing event. I had the challenging privilege of accompanying last year's Honduras team of youth and teens for one of our wonderful mission opportunities there. Of all the things that were difficult, the weather, the construction project itself and the language barrier, that was not the greatest challenge that we face. Our greatest challenge was a microbiological one. You see, our wonderful journey has the infamous reputation of being the “everyone got sick” trip. Fifteen of twenty-two of us were laid low by some still-unknown plague that seemed to take us at one point or another. So one might say that it was a challenge of our intestinal fortitude.

Then one morning about four days into our trip, as our stalwart band of walking wounded were making their way up the mountain pass to the little village of Rincon, Honduras, I had had it. I was done. Thinking about all the poverty, thinking about all the illness, the mud and looking back behind me and seeing a handful of very tired and very sick young people, I said “that's it. How can we possibly make a difference here? How can we do anything to help these people? Look at us? What are we among so many people? It would take a miracle.” I think that's how the disciples feel this morning. They've been travelling for weeks in the countryside. They're tired, they're dirty, they're hungry, just when they think they can sit down to rest for a little while by the Sea of Galilee, this crowd of even more hungry, more tired and dirtier people come on in. And one thing worse than that is they're hungry and looking for a meal. Jesus sees them and I love the question he asks. “Where are we to buy food for all these people?” Phillip felt like I did in Honduras. I can see him just throwing his arms up and saying you've got to be kidding me Jesus, it would be six months worth of paychecks to buy enough food for all these people. How could we possibly do that? You'll never find food for these people. What are we among so many? To make the point a little bit further, Andrew shows up with some kid's lunch. I don't know how he got it and I really don't want to know. But I'm sure he wasn't offering it out of any sense of faith, because I hear a similar tone, he ain't kidding chief, it's all we've got. Who are we among so many? It'll take a miracle. So Jesus tells the crowd to sit down and a miracle begins.

I know this will sound odd at first, but in scripture the point of a miracle isn't the miracle. A miracle is a place where we are asked to ask two questions. Who is this person that can do the impossible? Why do they do it? You see if we are not careful we might get

sidetracked by the miracle itself. We might ask questions like, did that really happen? Does Jesus really make a banquet out of a bagged lunch? I don't know if I can deal with that. Or maybe this is just the author's way of creating a metaphor about human generosity on the whole. That feels better. But scholars have been debating this question to death for the last several centuries and if you get caught up in that you will lose sight of the questions, the who and the why. So don't reject Jesus because of the presence of the super-natural. Don't accept the story and just leave it as a miracle. John is not trying to tell us something about loaves or fishes or human generosity. John is trying to tell us something about the who of the miracle and the why.

To top it off, in John's gospel, miracles are not even called miracles they are called signs. Signs. Signs that point to things greater than themselves. So the who is the easy part. You see, throughout John's gospel, John begins with that amazing prologue, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." He is telling the story of Jesus Christ in a new way, but he's telling it in such grand terms that the average ordinary Jew of the time would not have understood that. And like all human beings, sometimes we have to have the things that we are being taught, compared to the things that we know. So John has to use other images to explain how the Word was in the beginning and who is this Jesus person who does these miracles.

It's like when the Greeks went to Egypt for the first time. As they came down the Nile, they saw this giant purple thing in the water moving and frolicking about next to the alligators and they asked themselves, "What is this?" And so they called it the river horse, because they understood the river and they understood the horse and they had a word for horse that's hippo and they had a word for river that was potamus. Hippopotamus. It's much the same thing that John's doing here in the gospel, because John spends most of his gospel explaining Jesus in terms of Moses. Moses. You remember Moses don't you? The one who leads the people out of slavery, out of Egypt? The one who goes to the mountaintop and sees God and brings down the Ten Commandments. The person who parted the Red Sea, but more importantly for the this morning, the one who gave the people food in the desert where there was not food to be had. You see that's the who of our miracle this morning. That's the who that is important. John, throughout his gospel, compares Jesus to Moses to give the people of Israel something to hang their hat on. Something to help them understand "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The who.

But there are also two whys in this parable, this miracle, two whys that we are to discover and they come towards the end of the miracle. We hear the words, "when they were satisfied Jesus told His disciples, "Gather up the fragments that are leftover so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and from the fragments of five barley loaves left by those who had eaten they filled twelve baskets. The first one is the essence of grace, the essence of grace. Gather up the fragments that are leftover so that nothing may be lost. Jesus' mission is to reach out to a world and gather up the fragments of the human condition, our beaten, broken and battered lives are the reason that Jesus has come and He seeks to pick them up so that none of us may be lost. This miracle serves as that

sign; nothing is too small, no one too inconsequential to be forgotten by Jesus, not even fish and loaves. Gathering up the fragments so that nothing will be lost.

What will He do with them? That's the second why. They filled twelve baskets, not ten, not two, but twelve. And as John compares Jesus to Moses he also wants to bring to life the importance of other things in the Old Testament and the number twelve. It's not just Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat and his brothers. It's the twelve tribes of Israel. The people of God. Jesus will not only lead the people like Moses, He'll gather up the fragments of humanity and He will restore and bring to full completion the people of God. All twelve baskets will be full. All twelve tribes will be chosen. That's what the twelve symbolizes and that's the second why.

Jesus uses the lunch of a little boy to give the people a sign that He is the one that God sent and He will gather the people of God. What are they among so many? With the power of God's son, Jesus, these loaves and these fish are the means by which God demonstrates love and reconciliation. What are they among so many? They are everything, everything.

So we return to Honduras with a busload of sick teenagers and an impossible challenge before us. But what are they among so many people? They are everything; they are everything God needs to show the world Jesus and the grace Jesus brings. Whether it's five loaves and two fish or a busload of sick teenagers in the midst of such poverty and so much pain, Jesus is at work continually gathering up the fragments and making the people of God whole. He comes to make us part of that people and give us more than we could ask or imagine. Our world is filled with insurmountable problems, pain, war, hunger, and injustice. What are we among so much? What are we amongst these problems, so much pain and so many people? We are all God needs; we are all God needs to show the world, to show the world a sign of who God is and why Jesus has come. Amen.