

# **“They Need Not Go Away” by Elizabeth Gelfeld**

**August 3, 2014**

## **Eighth Sunday After Pentecost**

Here’s a Bible pop quiz: How many of Jesus’ miracles are recorded in all four Gospels? If your answer is “one,” you’re correct – and it’s the one we read today. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle story that made the cut. So the next question is, why? What does this story tell us about God, about Jesus, and about us, and who we are called to be in the world, that is so important that each of the four evangelists said, “Now, *that* story must be told.”

Because it appears in all four Gospels, I think it’s interesting to look at the bare bones of the story, what is common to all the versions, because the context and some of the details differ from one to another. Briefly, here’s the story:

1. Jesus heads out by boat to a deserted place.
2. Crowds of people from various towns find out where Jesus is going and follow him on foot; in Matthew and Mark, the crowds actually get there first.
3. Jesus has compassion for the people, and heals their sick.
4. Evening approaches, and the disciples come to Jesus and point out the obvious: “These people need to eat, and this is a deserted place. Send them away, so they can go buy their dinner.” (OK, John is a bit different here. John has Jesus anticipate the problem as soon as

the crowds arrive, and Jesus poses the question to Philip, as a test: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" But, happily, I'm not preaching from John.)

5. All the food that is available is five loaves of bread and two fish. The crowd numbers 5,000 men – and only Matthew adds, at the very end of his story, "besides women and children." Thank you, Matthew, I think.
6. Jesus takes the food, gives thanks to God and blesses it, and gives it back to the disciples to distribute to the people. After all have eaten their fill, the disciples collect the leftovers, which fill twelve baskets.

I went to La Antigua, Guatemala, three weeks before the rest of the Seekers pilgrims so that I could spend some time studying Spanish intensively. La Antigua has two main industries – tourism and Spanish instruction. There are around 50 schools in this small city, and they all work pretty much the same way. In my school, which is one of the larger ones, the building is an open corridor on two levels, surrounding a central courtyard. So, you're outdoors, under a roof. All along the corridor are small tables, each with two chairs and a whiteboard on an easel. Each teacher-student pair sits at one of those tables – all the instruction is one-on-one. I studied five hours a day with my teacher for two weeks, and seven hours a day for my last week.

At night, after doing a couple hours of homework, I began to prepare for this sermon by reading the Gospel in Spanish. I used a side-by-side, Spanish-English translation, and read two or three verses a day. One thing reading the scriptures in a language you don't know well does for you is that it forces you to slow . . . down. And, as I read, slowly, I

noticed things I never saw before, in all the years I've been reading this story – and I've read it probably at least once a year since I was about 10.

Reading slowly, in Spanish, I especially noticed the verbs – those action words. Which is not surprising, because the basic level of Spanish I was studying is all about verbs – in their various tenses and persons and infinite variety of irregularities. I was memorizing dozens of them every day, forgetting most of them, and reviewing them over and over in the hope that at least the most useful ones would eventually stick. So, reading this Gospel, I was pleased to find some verbs I recognized.

*Tomó* – Jesus *took* the five loaves and two fish,

*Bendijo* – *blessed* them,

*Partió* – *broke* them,

*Dio* – *gave* them to the disciples, who gave them to the people.

In a few minutes we'll hear similar words, as we prepare for communion. One of our celebrants will say, "On the night of his arrest, Jesus *took* bread, and after *giving thanks* to God, *broke* it and said, 'This is my body.' " Those words are older than the Gospels; they come from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, so they represent one of the very earliest Christian practices.

Matthew sets his story of the feeding of the 5,000 in the context of the senseless and gruesome murder of John the Baptist by King Herod. Matthew begins: "Now when Jesus heard this, . . ." – and what he heard was the news of John's death, which John's disciples came and told him after they buried John's body.

When Jesus goes ashore and sees the crowd of people, he

feels compassion. The Greek word used is a body-related term, having to do with the internal organs. Jesus doesn't just pity the people, as someone might pity a starving child from a distance. Jesus feels *with* the people, and one commentator, Mark Davis, says that the best English word for it might be "gut-wrenching." Davis suggests that the people's following Jesus into the wilderness was also a reaction to the news of John's death. Jesus shares their gut-wrenching grief and pain.

A revolutionary leader could have used this moment to start a war. Five thousand men in one place, grief-stricken and probably furious about the killing of John the baptizer, could easily be rallied into an army to storm Herod's palace. But instead, this is a story about people being healed and fed.

"They have no need to go away; you give them something to eat."

The disciples are thinking in a linear, logical way: It's getting late, we're in the middle of nowhere, it's time to close this show and move on because the people will be hungry and *they* need to go to the villages and buy dinner. We're done here.

But Jesus turns this thinking inside-out. In Matthew's version, Jesus says, "You give them something to eat," before he even knows about the five loaves and two fish. The disciples come right back at him with that fact: "We have nothing here but . . . "

"Here" – in their minds – is a place of scarcity, of limited resources. There's barely enough for us, certainly nothing for all these other people. They need to go somewhere else and fend for themselves. Perfectly logical – who could argue with that?

Jesus doesn't argue. Instead, he speaks from a different

reality, God's reality. In Jesus' awareness is wide-open spaciousness, room for God to act. The place of abundance is not somewhere else, far distant; it's "here" – in *this* place. Jesus simply says, "Bring the food to me." And the disciples, whatever they might be wondering about what Jesus is up to, do exactly that.

What if we did that?

How often do we give out of our leftovers? How many times do we first provide for ourselves and our loved ones – whether it's food or medical care or time off for rest and spiritual nourishment – and then cast our eyes over the needs of the world to see where we might distribute what's left. And sometimes we even give more – we give a little or a lot more of what we really thought was ours, and, let's be honest, we feel a just a little pleasure in the pain of sacrifice.

But what if, even from our limited, logical, scarcity-based thinking, what if we began to really bring everything to Jesus? Our insufficient resources, our small talents, our aging bodies, our lack of faith; our oxygen masks that we know to put on ourselves first, before we try to help anyone else; our protective boundaries. What if we bring it all to Jesus?

I don't mean exchanging our linear, logical, scarcity-based thinking for linear, logical, abundance-based thinking. Because that just keeps us in our very human rut of believing the way out of scarcity is to get better and better at giving more and more and making greater and greater sacrifices – which is really presuming we can be gods instead of finite, limited creatures.

We *are* finite. We *are* limited. We have only so much energy, only so many hours in the day, only five loaves and two fish.

And the Gospel tells us that is enough. Even more than

enough. There is nothing that God cannot do to take care of us. Even when all seems lost, when *our ruler* has committed this horrible atrocity. He's too big to overthrow, too cruel to endure, what are we to do? Even then, the sick are healed, the people are fed, and then we gather up the leftovers – food for the journey.

Mark Davis suggests that, rather than “Jesus feeds the 5,000-plus,” a better understanding of this story is, “Jesus enables the disciples to feed the 5,000-plus.” This story gives legs to the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the hungry, for they shall be filled.”

This is a lesson about discipleship, and about communion. Jesus doesn't say, “Bring me the food and I'll feed them.” He says, “*You* feed them.”

Matthew doesn't tell us exactly when the miracle occurred. He tells us that a Eucharist occurred – Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave food – to his disciples, who then gave it to more than 15,000 people – let's count those women and children – and there's no explanation of how it came to be that everyone had all they wanted to eat and there were twelve baskets of leftovers.

Perhaps that gap – that open, miracle moment – is what we are being called into.

Amen. Let it be so.