

MARK 6:35–44. (EHV)

It was already late in the day when his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place and it is already very late. Send them away so they can go into the surrounding country and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” But he answered them, “**You give them something to eat.**” They asked him, “Should we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?” He said to them, “**How many loaves do you have? Go see.**” When they found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” He directed everyone to sit down in groups on the green grass. They sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, and blessed the loaves and broke them. Then he kept giving pieces to his disciples to set in front of them. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied. Then they picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. There were five thousand men who ate the loaves.

We heard last week that Jesus and his disciples had set off across the Sea of Galilee for a secluded place where they could get some rest. But a large crowd went on foot along the shore and met them at their destination. Rather than getting angry at them and telling them to scram, Jesus had compassion on them and began teaching them many things. Most of the people in this crowd had probably gone several miles on foot to find Jesus, maybe as many as five miles or more, and now it was getting late, and very, very few of them had given any thought to food before leaving. Their only thought was seeing Jesus and listening to Jesus.

So the disciples come to him as it’s getting quite late in the day and tell him, “You know, this is remote place and it’s already pretty late. It would be good to send these people away now, so that they have some time to go and find some food they can buy.” Luke tells us that the disciples also suggested that they would need to find lodging. And all of this would take time, considering the availability of food and lodging in the area and the size of the crowd.

Just how large was the crowd? Well, of course we are told there were five thousand men, which is already a sizable crowd, but that’s not including women and children. How many were there if we include the women and children? The Evangelists do give us some hints. When the disciples told Jesus to dismiss the crowd so that they could go and buy themselves something to eat, Jesus answered them, “You give them something to eat.” To that the disciples replied, “Should we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?”

A denarius was a typical laborer’s daily wage. So the disciples were suggesting that they would need to spend an amount equal to two hundred days’ worth of income on bread, a good seven to eight months’ worth of pay, in order to feed the crowd. Now of course, the disciples could have just been ballparking that number, and they might have been exaggerating, in effect telling Jesus, “It would cost us *a lot* of money to feed this crowd.” But John tells us Jesus had a private conversation with Philip, in which Philip told him that two hundred denarii wouldn’t even purchase enough bread for each individual just to have “a little something.” So I don’t think the disciples were exaggerating. In fact, they might have been *underestimating* how much money they would need.

Okay, so how much bread could two hundred denarii purchase in those days? Now I didn’t do a ton of scholarly research on this, but I did encounter a couple reference works that

claimed or suggested that one denarius could perhaps purchase somewhere between eight to twelve loaves of bread, each loaf perhaps weighing a pound. If that's correct, that means that two hundred denarii could have purchased somewhere between 1,600 and 2,400 loaves of bread. And Philip thought that wouldn't be enough for each individual to just have "a little something." I think it's probably pretty conservative to say that each loaf could have been sliced or broken into at least six pieces. Let's call that "a little something." Based on that standard, 1,600 to 2,400 loaves could have made 9,600 to 14,400 pieces. Keep in mind that these are fairly conservative numbers, and Philip thought that still wouldn't be enough. So I don't think it's too far-fetched to say that, including women and children, this crowd may have numbered around 15,000 people.

Yet Jesus gives his apostles an impossible command: "No, I'm not going to send them away. You give them something to eat." How are they going to do that?

Here we have a great example of Jesus giving what he commands so that those to whom he gives the command can fulfill the command. After telling the disciples to take inventory of the food, they find one boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish. Jesus acts as if, "Okay, we have what we need." He tells the disciples to have the people sit down in groups, and they do so, sitting on the green grass in groups of hundreds and fifties—probably around eighty groups or so. He then took the food, looked up to heaven, said a blessing over it, then took the five loaves and began to break them and distribute them—not directly to the people, but to his disciples, so that they could give them to the people, thus fulfilling the command that Jesus had given them, "You give them something to eat." That's exactly what they did, thanks to Jesus.

How exactly he did it, we don't know. It seems to me that, like the rest of Jesus's miracles, it took place in a very non-flashy way. Most people in the crowd probably assumed that Jesus and his disciples already had all the food they needed, and didn't even notice that anything miraculous was happening. The apostles probably noticed, but it seems that Jesus simply gave each of them food to distribute, they went and distributed it to the people in one of the groups, came back, and Jesus had more food to distribute to them, and so they distributed some to another group, and so on, until everyone had their fill and was satisfied. And the disciples were simply left to ask, "How is this happening?"

And I'm guessing there was at least one other miracle involved too. When God miraculously provided bread from heaven for the Israelites in the Old Testament, it wasn't just bland bread that had the nutrition they needed. It had the taste of honey; God wanted them not just to have food to eat, but also to enjoy it. So too here, I'm guessing the bread had honey or butter or some other flavor-enhancer on it, and that the fish had some sort of spice or other flavor-enhancer on it.

Jesus in fact provided for their hunger so richly through his disciples that his disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of leftover pieces. That is, each one of them gathered a full basket of leftovers, which they themselves would have been able to eat and also to share with Jesus.

The Lord clearly loved to give bread. He richly provided for their physical needs and then some.

Who of us cannot testify to the same? Yes, there may have been times when money was tight or when you weren't certain how you or your family were going to get what you needed, but did Jesus ever fail? After all, here we are.

Time for another Strieter story. Lutheran pastor Johannes Strieter wrote in his 1904 autobiography that, while serving several rural parishes in Wisconsin, he and his family endured a particularly cold stretch one winter. He seems to suggest that it started around Christmas, so that they weren't even able to hold Christmas services that year. Oh, they took a horse and sled to go to the log community center where one congregation held church, but on a sharp turn the sled tipped over and Mrs. Strieter nearly froze to death. On top of that, when they finally arrived at the community center, they had difficulty getting a fire going, Pastor Strieter's Communion wine was like chopped ice, and no one else showed up anyway, because it was so cold. They had to go home, where Pastor Strieter says that he, his wife, his five children (one of whom was still quite young), the family maid, and the school teacher had to live a "camp life" in the parsonage for a week.

At one point, Pastor Strieter told the school teacher that they needed to go upstairs and bring the meat barrel down by the fire stove, so that the meat wouldn't all freeze into one clump, making it unusable. So they went upstairs. The school teacher grabbed the bottom end, Pastor Strieter grabbed the top end, and the school teacher began backing down the stairs slowly. But the barrel became too heavy for him, so he let it drop and jumped to the side. The barrel rolled and banged down the stairs and crashed in the wall of the house so hard that the whole house shook. "But," Pastor Strieter writes, "that was our good fortune, because the meat had in fact already frozen together and the impact caused it to break up into pieces."

They needed water too, and the water in the well in front of their house froze. So they pulled the pump out, lowered a ladder into the twelve-foot hole, went down with a hatchet, chopped through the ice, and took water up in bowlfuls. Even though Pastor Strieter says the soil was sandy, as it is in places around here, and the water came out of the sand and was not deep, the well never gave out all winter.

Even during the coldest week of Pastor Strieter's long life, the Lord didn't just give him bread; he gave it generously, with leftovers, so to speak.

When my dad was assigned to his first parish in 1984, a small country congregation in Wisconsin, he was married with one son, myself, and another one on the way. His salary was less than \$10,000 a year. If you had told him at that time that the son on the way would be born healthy, and that he would eventually have another five and eventually a daughter, too, and he would not only feed and clothe all of them, but would also send them all to parochial elementary school and then to a preparatory, boarding high school where they would study for the ministry, I'm not sure if he would have believed that was possible. But that's what happened. And not a one of us ever thought we were lacking, because we weren't. The Lord didn't just give us bread; he gave it generously, with leftovers.

And I could bore you with probably a dozen more personal stories, and you all could tell me yours. And they would all back up what David says in Psalm 37: "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." And they would all back up what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all your earthly needs will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33).

Did you notice how Jesus stressed to his disciples his love for giving?

“Send them away, Jesus, so they can go into the surrounding countryside and villages and *buy* themselves something to eat.”

“No, you *give* them something to eat.”

“You want them to *buy* bread?” Jesus says. “No, no, no. You *give* it to them. For free.”

Jesus loves to give for free. He loves to give bread to those in need, as he did here. But he meant for that to illustrate an even greater truth about an even greater need, as the Gospel of John tells us Jesus made clear the following day. He wants you to see him giving all these people bread in abundance, bread for free, and then to hear him say, “I am the Bread of Life. . . . I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Then he wants you to connect the dots: If Jesus loves giving earthly bread for free, even though that only keeps us alive temporarily, then he must love even more giving the bread of eternal life for free. Which is exactly what he does.

“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and none of this is from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). Every Sunday it’s as if Jesus commands his pastors, “Give these people something to eat—not bread for their bodies, but food for their souls that will feed them eternally.”

And we tell him, “Here is a book, and one some Sundays I have some bread and wine, but how far will that go among so many, and how can it feed them to that extent?”

“Bring them here to me,” he says. And he blesses them and gives them to us to give to you. For free. And through his word and sacraments, he feeds us himself. He feeds us his flesh. We eat the flesh of Jesus, which he gave for the life of the world, by believing that he is God in the flesh who has suffered and poured out his blood and died for us. And his word and sacraments are what enable us to believe that.

If you think Jesus has provided for your physical needs generously, that’s just a drop in the bucket compared to what he gives us spiritually. If we could see what we look like in God’s eyes for Jesus’s sake, if we could see the protection we enjoy from his angels, if we could know how often Jesus forgives us on a daily basis, if we could see the treasures God has stored up for us in heaven, if we could just grasp all of our spiritual riches, the banquet Jesus spreads out for us in his word and in his sacraments every single day, we would be full to bursting with joy. It’s everything we need, with leftovers, and much more than twelve basketfuls.

Each day, as we sit down to our meals, let us look up to heaven as Jesus did and thank God for the heavenly bounty that gives us our food, shelters our heads, clothes our bodies, and so much more. And let us thank him all the more for the heavenly bread he gives us in Word and sacraments, not by our works or merits, but for free, as a gift. The Lord loves to give bread. There is no one as bountiful and generous as he. Amen.