

*There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?*

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When I lived in Birmingham I supplied regularly at a small parish in southern Alabama, St. Matthias in Dothan. The little parish of mostly five older women met faithfully in a Methodist chapel every Sunday evening for Mass. After moving to Georgia, and getting married, I had the opportunity to say Mass for them one last time, which proved to be one of the most memorable Masses of my life so far. On that particular Sunday evening, God finally answered the prayers of those five faithful ladies, and almost one hundred visitors walked into the little chapel, to join them for Mass. This was their wildest dream come true, but for me, and for any other priest, would quickly become the stuff of nightmares. I was helping one of the ladies set up for Mass while we were watching people come into the church by the dozens. I remember looking at the quarter bottle of wine and asking her, *do we have more wine?* She said, *no, if we had any idea these many people were going to show up, I would have gone to the store earlier.* We opened the little bread box, and saw inside what were, maybe, only twenty hosts, and she said, *here, father, better use the rest of the box.* I opened the box and saw that there were only about twenty more hosts in the box.

What to do? Rather than cancel Mass, I thought maybe only some of the congregation will come up to receive Holy Communion. But by the time we got to the point of distributing Holy Communion, it was apparent that everyone intended to come forward. I remember getting through the first two rows at the altar rail, looking down at the paten, and then walking swiftly back up to the altar rail, breaking as many hosts as I could in half, and then communing the next row at the rail. I did this three or four more times, breaking the hosts in half and even in quarters. Thankfully, we only ran out of the wine, but had just enough hosts, half hosts, and quarter hosts, to give to everyone who came up to receive. Thankfully the Church teaches that if we receive only the wine, or only the host, and not the other, we have received Christ in both kinds. I tell you this story, not that I consider it a miracle on the level of Jesus miraculously feeding multitudes, but maybe it was the kind of minor miracle that Our Lord works today in response to our obedience and resourcefulness.

We get a sense of this in the Gospel. The Church loves this story of Jesus feeding the multitude. In comparison to the other Gospel stories, we hear this one more often through the Church year, and it is easy for even clergy to gloss over the lessons in this particular Gospel. This week I was struck particularly by the practicality of St. Philip, who comes to Jesus and says, Lord, *two hundred denarii*, (that is, almost a year's wage) *would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.* Philip seems to say, even if we took up a collection, we could not buy enough for them to get even a little bit of bread, and where would they buy it? Then we see the resourcefulness of Andrew. He brings to Jesus a lad who has five barley loaves and two small fish, and asks Jesus, *but what are these among so many?* Notice that in these two disciples, we see that even with the largest amount of money they could imagine, or with what little food they were able to scrounge up from the crowd, they could not solve their problem. In the pervasive cynicism of today we may wonder, why would then even bother to mention to Jesus that there was a lad in their midst with so little to offer?

Why bring so little to Jesus? It is only in the Kingdom of Heaven that we are rewarded infinitely for bringing what little we have to Christ. If we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we are promised that is enough faith to move mountains. We see this even in the Old Testament when God rains down manna on the Israelites in the middle of nowhere, a small and seemingly insignificant place, and it is just enough for each person to have their fill. The prophets Elijah and Elisha both saw how God provides, bringing Elijah bread daily by ravens, and how the widow's meal barrel never emptied, and the cruse of oil never ran dry. God can and will provide, but God's provision requires something from us in return. It requires our faith, obedience, and courage. This is important to remember as we consider how we should pledge our time, talent, and

treasure to God in His Church this coming year. We can be like 'practical' Philip, and think to ourselves, *Lord, I don't make enough money, or I don't have enough time, or much talent to speak of.* The Lord said to Philip, to test him, *where may we buy enough bread that these may eat?* Because He wanted to get Philip out of his practical way of thinking and invite him to step out in faith. He turned to Andrew and invited him to take yet another step out in faith, and gladly accepts what little he has to offer, five loaves of bread, and two fish, and multiplies it, so that over five thousand men, women, and children had eaten until they were full, with twelve baskets left over. It is only in the Kingdom of Heaven that what we consider little, even five barley loaves, and two small fish, the food of poor people, is gladly accepted, blessed, and multiplied beyond our wildest dreams.

Then we should consider also that over five thousand people go out into the wilderness to sit at Jesus' feet, they sacrifice their time, maybe even that day's work and chores, and their spiritual hunger is rewarded, and they are filled spiritually and physically. A little boy's talent of remembering to bring his lunch with him, lands him an immortal place in the Gospel. The disciple's talent for service is joyfully rewarded as they witness this miracle firsthand. But to give of our treasure, time, and talent as the young lad did takes faith, courage, and obedience to overcome the prevailing cynicism of our day. What if Andrew did not think it worth bringing the little boy and his poor lunch to Jesus? What if the Lord had said, *no, this fish and bread are not enough?* What if the disciples had said to Jesus after He had blessed the bread and fish and said, *Lord, there is no way this is going to work?* We see in the disciples, even in Philip, the budding fruits of the Holy Spirit which we pray for in ourselves this week.

We pray this week, that classic Collect as we prepare to enter the holy season of Advent, *Stir up, we beseech thee, O lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord.* Some might say it is dangerous to pray for God to stir us up and to shake us. Indeed, God will stir us up, not just to test our faith, but to wake us out of our spiritual slumbers, out of our old ways of sin. He stirs us up so we may better understand our place in the great mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven, that the old hymn is true, *Little is much, when God is in it.* Amen.