

*Questions Jesus Asked -  
“How Many Loaves Do You Have?”*

*Bible Reading:  
Matthew 15: 29-39*

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At first glance it seemed ridiculous. A rhetorical, almost snide, sort of bad joke. Until the disciples looked again at the face of their Master and realized that he was serious. No sneer. No rhetoric. He wasn't laughing. His body language gave no indication that Jesus considered his request to be ridiculous.

On the contrary -- 4000 men, plus their dependants who may have tagged along -- don't bother going to Loblaws. Don't call the caterer.  
Just feed them.

And the boys look at their collective lunch box, with its five bagels and two smoked fish,  
and look.....  
and look.....  
and look.

They're paralysed. Unable to do anything.  
You know the feeling, right? Where a project seems so big, so overwhelming, that you don't even know where to begin. Like when mom tells you to clean up your room. Too much! And so you end up just sitting there in the mess.

Till Christ breaks the logjam -  
"Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each."

They do, and our Lord takes those obviously limited resources, multiplying them indefinitely until they are able to meet the needs of every single person there.  
With leftovers besides!

This is not the first, nor the only, example of this sort of thing happening -- divine multiplication of limited resources to meet human need. One other example is in the Old Testament, 1 Kings 17, where the prophet Elijah is used by God to provide oil and flour for a widow woman -- a jar and a bucket that never emptied out, providing enough so that the widow and her son had enough to eat during three years of famine.

The disciples knew that story. They'd learned it from childhood, and heard it in the Synagogues. They'd heard the Rabbi preach it in sermon after sermon, "God provides when human resources run dry."  
Many of you know the story, too.

Funny though, isn't it, that while we have no trouble accepting something like this happening way back when, it's virtually impossible to believe that it could happen again --  
Here and now.

Just doesn't happen.  
Won't happen.  
Can't.

We think.

That's certainly what the disciples thought, until after the whole affair was over and they were left scratching their heads, wondering what to do with all the left-overs.

It's what the disciples thought.....  
And I guess I sort of wonder what we would think.  
What do we think?

The disciples were faced with an immediate but real problem of hunger. A few thousand people right in front of them. It was one symptom of a much bigger problem - world hunger, something that's been around since time immemorial. Something our Lord saw, and commented on when He said, "*The poor you will always have with you.*"

It's a huge problem, almost paralyzing in size.

Not just for the disciples.

But for us.

We look around the world and wonder how it would be possible to feed all these people. **Is** it even our problem to solve?

To which, of course, come devastating words from our Lord some 10 chapters later, Matthew 25:

31 ¶ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.

32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,

36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?

39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Oh.

And the question - "*How many loaves do you have?*"

Which comes not only to the first disciples, but to Christian Reformed disciples gathered on a hot Sunday evening in Ottawa.

What kind of a question is that, Lord? A joke?

Look how many of them there are.

Look how little the few of us have got.

There's no way.

So - what do we think?

Is the incredulity of the first disciples, seen in their response to Jesus' observation on the state of the crowd - "*Where could we get enough bread...?*"

Is that same uncertainty working in us?

What power do we believe to be radiating from the One whose name is Immanuel, who said "*Surely, I will be with you always....*"?

Can we believe that He will take limited resources and use them to bring enormous change in the lives of needy people still today?

Going through some files this week, doing the summer clean out thing, I happened across some stories of work done by Christian Reformed World Relief. One was an account of Ngosha, This determined mother,

because of a small amount invested in her life through donations from folks like you, is now able to feed, clothe and educate her children; is now able to walk through life with her head held high -- a mother with new hope and dignity.

Tell me - does that count as a miracle?

Thanks be to God!

I took a copy of this year's Agenda For Synod, where on page 184ff I found accounts of similar miracles worked in various communities around the globe -- where small amounts were invested by Christians in obedience to the call of the Lord to care, and the Lord blessed these investments so that lives have achieved sustainable change.

They can eat -- for today, and tomorrow, and in the future.

Miracle.

Want to know what a miracle looks like when the Lord extends His divine hand of blessing over limited human resources in a new millenium? It is a small bunch of believers, some 300,000 believers in Jesus gathered across North America in an outfit called the *Christian Reformed Church*, believing that the Lord calls us to respond to needs of hunger and injustice and suffering

digging deep into our pockets to find what we can

mandating, ordaining and commissioning women & men to go into the world in the name of Christ and to use what we have found to work towards sustainable change for the good in the lives of people in need,

people loved by the Lord,

people just like you and I made in the image of God,

people for whom Jesus died.

We've prayed for them as we send them out, that the Lord of miracles would work miracles through their labours, blessing them, making them fruitful.

In the name of Christ, let me say to each of you, as part of the Christian Reformed Church, **THANK YOU!!**

\_\_\_\_\_ Thank you for your generosity.

Thank you for trusting that these dollars you give **WILL** make a difference against an enormous mountain of misery and need around this world.

Thank you for NOT saying, "*We need to keep that money here at home to do our own thing better.*"

In the name of Jesus -- Thank you for sharing!

You gave your money, and it was joined together with the loaves and fishes that other Christian Reformed disciples of Jesus found in their lunch buckets across North America.

The result?

Over 200,000 people in various corners of the globe have seen sustainable change in their lives this past year. Sustainable change means that they didn't just get a fish to serve as today's meal. They were better equipped to go fishing for themselves so they could continue to eat. Ngosha is the head of one such household.

For some it was learning to read and write. For others it meant achieving a measure of economic self-sufficiency. Or better health for their children.

Total loaves and fishes collected from congregations like ours across North America came to over \$11million this past year.

Over the past decade the Lord has blessed efforts of CRWRC-Canada in its relationships with the Canadian Government and CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) so that over \$30million has been generated for foreign aid!

**THAT** is the stuff of miracles!

Loaves and fishes multiplied in our time by the grace of God.

Today, by way of a prodding question from the Word of God, is a chance for us to stop and acknowledge that God has been at work, and that He continues to work miracles of provision and multiplication.

Today is also a day to rededicate ourselves to being people who give and serve, no matter how meagre the resources may first seem.

We rededicate ourselves in hope to serve the One who has a divine arsenal of resources at His disposal, ready to unleash for Kingdom service;

the One who said: *"for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills."*  
(Ps 50)

We rededicate ourselves as parents who desire to train our children to look to the One from whom all blessings flow, that they may receive His gifts with an easy and open hand, ready to pass those gifts along in the good hope that He will multiply them in the lives of recipients.

We rededicate ourselves as individuals who handle their own finances with care -- seeing what we've been given as a trust handed to us by the Lord, a trust to be used wisely and carefully --- **not** our own STUFF to be hoarded.

In that regard, perhaps, going home and considering what percentage of our income is directed towards relief and aid work such as that which CRWRC carries out in its remarkably efficient and effective manner.

Considering -- I wonder -- if a 2% target of family income would be attainable for aid/relief donations. Is that out of line?

They become loaves and fishes, which when given into the hands of the Miracle Worker, become powerful seeds of hope and change in a very needy world.

It also becomes a day, as we consider the provocative question of Christ, to consider how we are doing as a nation of Canada.

I was hunting for the figures and couldn't nail them down this week, but I believe that Canada had once set a 5% of GDP figure for foreign aid. We're coming in far short of that. In fact, in our era of government downsizing and budget slashing, foreign aid is one of the first things to be squeezed.

Can we as citizens of bold hope, citizens of Canada, and citizens of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Can we raise these issues in the public forum?

Many of you probably know that government policy is very directly influenced by something termed "*Social Space*." That means - how much room the public is willing to give towards a specific issue, and what are their attitudes towards that issue.

I recall watching Ann McLellan, our justice minister, exemplify this during a TV interview a few years ago. What she said about the particular contentious issue of the day still sticks with me. The gist of it was something like:

*"Government cannot act on their own. This is a matter to be decided in the arena of public thought and townsquare dialogue."*

Meaning the government wants to know what public opinion on the matter is, and they will run with that.

Now, we've been told that matters of Foreign Aid consistently show up at the bottom of the heap when surveys and public opinion polls make their way into the offices of policy analysts on Parliament Hill.

And so, in a day and age of every increasing pressure for every last nickel of public money from this lobby group and that, all wanting to consume as many loaves and fishes as they can, the stuff that the public seems to care about least will be the first to undergo the bean-counter's hatchet.

Meaning -- the challenge for those who hear the question of Christ is to go into the office space and talk about world aid over coffee; talk about it over the back fence with your neighbour; talk about it with your family; talk about it here as church members; talk about it in your bowling league;

Christ's question challenges us to, in turn, challenge our nation to share with those in need, to share in a way that builds life and enhances dignity.

So go - ask the loaves and fishes question of your elected representatives. Contact them with phone calls and letters of encouragement.

Let them know how grateful you are of Government initiatives through agencies like CIDA, and encouragement to keep it up and strengthen it.

And don't cave in to the paralyzing fear that your voice is only one, and how could that ever make a difference in the face of such an enormous challenge.

Don't give in to that.

Remember the Lord of miracles.

Remember the loaves and fishes.

Give thanks.

Stand firm in hope.

Look forward.

Take action.

And remember

*For as much as you do it to one of the least of these you do it unto me.*