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Introduction

In an era in which we regularly hear the cry of 'fake news!' this is a fascinating story to study. What could the headlines be? 'Every little helps.' 'Robin Hood-style character steals boy's lunch and gives it to the poor.' 'Picnic in the park a great success.' 'Biggest crowd ever (until Trump's inauguration obviously).' 'Jesus doesn't care about you – disciples have to point out crowd's hunger.' None of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) agree on the details of the so-called 'feeding of the five thousand' but each author/editor decided that it was an important story to include. No matter which version you are drawn to, there are lessons contained there that apply to life today as we address the divisions we face in society and the conflicts we feel helpless to solve around the world.

Text

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be

afraid.' Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

Comment

The contemporary relevance of this reading is astounding. There is so much need in the world and it is difficult to imagine how we can address it all. Over generations, we have professionalised caring and reaching out to those in need to the point where it no longer feels like it is our shared responsibility as human beings. It has become acceptable to delegate to agencies, organisations, charities and governmental departments. This reading challenges the conflict between the powerlessness we feel and the amazing agents of change we truly are.

This reading speaks to the powerlessness we feel in the face of great need.

Even considering the differences between the Gospel accounts, you can sense the panic the disciples experience as they look out at the crowd, which is getting hungrier by the second. 'We don't have enough food...actually, we don't have enough money for food...this is going to be a PR nightmare!' They looked out on the faces of the individuals that made up that crowd and saw their desperation to hear and see Jesus or to be healed by him and they had no idea how they could first address the issue of their hunger.

I think this feeling is something to which we can all relate. We know that we want to do something to improve the lives of others: addressing poverty on a global scale, creating a welcoming, affirming and nurturing society, promoting reconciliation and peace and reducing conflict. However, I believe it has become too easy to use the excuse that feeling powerless in the face of such need has paralysed us into inaction. As we see images of overcrowded refugee camps, boats dangerously packed with those seeking asylum, cages filled with children separated from their families at borders, poverty, discrimination, hate, violence, we feel so small in comparison to the size of the problems facing this generation. We naturally question what level of impact we can individually make. However, if we were all to take daily steps towards forgiveness, peace, love and hope, imagine what the combined effort would achieve. We can choose to approach each day with the aim of changing the world for one person. I believe the ripple effect could be overwhelming in its positivity.

This reading speaks to our growing realisation that we need to share what we have so that we can all have what we need.

Think of your most recent shopping list. Be honest with yourself – how many of the items did you simply want, rather than actually need? Many people in the world today have excess in their lives but the narrative has changed over time and we have grown to think of luxuries as necessities. I dream of living a simpler life, where sharing is part of the culture and a necessary part of life. As neighbours, we could share what we have to spare on a daily basis. As towns and cities, we could use our excess to ensure that those who are struggling are provided for. As countries, we could take measures to minimise our waste and campaign for our governments to take seriously discussions about global wealth and poverty, sharing of resources and food sustainability. Each one of us has the potential to be an agent of change.

This reading shows that it does not matter who takes the initiative but someone has to make the first move.

In the Gospels, there is variance about who noticed the hunger of the people in the crowd and realised that something had to be done. However, in Mark, Jesus says to the disciples, 'You give them something to eat.' It was not good enough to pass the buck and send the people away to fend for themselves – Jesus told them to take responsibility and act. In John's Gospel, it is reported that Andrew took the initiative and found a boy who was willing to offer the food he had. My interpretation of what happened next is that others saw what a child had offered and it started a chain reaction that resulted in everyone being fed. All the small offerings the crowd could make were gathered together, as each person realised that they had something to give, and shared out, they amounted to more than was needed for all. We need to encourage others to have the confidence to share what they have with the world by making our offerings without hesitation.

I hear the voice of Jesus calling out to us too, 'You do it!' It is not good enough to sit back and think that it is someone else's job to do. We all have something to offer, even in the face of the world's greatest problems. One little act at a time can change the world. Together we can make poverty, injustice, violence, and division the 'fake news' of the future.

Note: If your world feels overwhelming right now, try one little step at a time. Break your problems down. Ask for help, just like Andrew did. Try a little act of kindness towards yourself or others. You matter. Your life matters because we are all needed together to share what we have. It took the whole crowd, including Jesus and the disciples, sharing together what they had in order to meet the needs of the whole crowd.

Response

– Engage in an act of random kindness, e.g. when having a coffee, choose at random another table to pay for, or buy a bunch of flowers in the supermarket and give them to someone who you've seen struggling with children during their shopping trip.

– Practice gratitude. Say thank you. Appreciate what you have and who has given it to you. At night, give thanks for three things that have happened during the day. Seek out the positive.

Prayer

Maker of the miraculous multiplication,
open our eyes to see
all that we have in life,
rather than those things we wish we had.
Nurture in our hearts
gratitude and generosity
so we might share all we have
and all we are.

Amen.
