**Just Give An Inch**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

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**Matthew 14:13-21**

I do not spend copious hours on Facebook or most others forms of social media. I am pretty incompetent at doing many of the things that many others do with ease. I do not post photographs nor add to my timeline very often. I give my page a cursory check most days and get on with things. But I read something on my daughter’s page that both was witty and wise. She posted: ***At bedtime my children become dehydrated philosophers in need of a hug.***

Having had the privilege of putting her children to bed myriad times I know whereof she speaks. On the surface it may seem at bedtime as though children just want to prolong the inevitable but there may be something more significant and important at play. It is the final few moments in a day with the undivided attention of the parent; perhaps for the first time in the course of an entire day that has been spent attending to the routine of task and sharing mom or dad’s attention with siblings and significant others. When a child has a parent at their bedside with their undivided attention-if only for a few minutes- it may be a gift of well spent time.

Perhaps it has been the first opportunity in a busy day of work, play, performing tasks and responsibilities and of putting in the hours between rising and retiring that a child has the time to be alone with their thoughts and to share their ruminations and reflections with a caregiver. Perhaps there is more wisdom that wit in the truth that at bedtime children become dehydrated philosophers in need of a hug. I want to remember this in ensuing weeks when I am charged with the privilege of overseeing nighttime rituals with my grandchildren and remember the gift of undivided attention, and listen to the tiny philosopher ruminate at the end of a day.

If I just give an inch to the increasing desire to retreat from the bedside as quickly as possible to assume my seat in front of the television and focus more on the tiny philosopher in my presence I may have the opportunity to share in their imagination. Or hear of hopes, dreams and fears because children, in no less a way than adults, usually reflect upon their day in the ebbing moments before falling asleep. All too often practicality can usurp imagination and reality speak in a more commanding voice than the realm of impossibility. Thus it was for the disciples of Jesus as the day was ebbing and the disciples wanted the crowd to disperse so that they too could get something to eat and have a break from the demands of discipleship. But Jesus was too overcome with compassion to command the crowd to disperse. He responds to his disciples that the crowd does not need to go; you provide for their needs.

The disciples, like a parent aware of a ticking clock, could not begin to fathom that there was any way that so great a crowd could be fed and wanted only to excuse themselves from the responsibility. Be quiet and go to sleep became go home and feed yourselves. Their gentle but reality based admonishment of Jesus rooted in logic and fatigue: the hour is late send them away not too different from I want to sit in my chair and watch my shows without thirsty philosophers intruding on my me time. So they push it with Jesus.

There is a scarcity of food; hardly sufficient for one let alone the sizeable crowd. But Jesus is not swayed by their protestations or their fatigue and asked them to produce what they had. Now let’s digress for a moment from the drama in the unfolding story.

Jesus has just received the devastating news that his cousin, John, has been mercilessly executed by Herod. In grief he tries to steal away from the demands of crowd and disciple to grieve; to try to make sense of the loss of a good man and devoted servant. But the crowd is relentless in their pursuit of his time and attention. Jesus is very affected at a deeply personal level, but he does not turn the crowd away. Despite his fatigue he is moved by compassion to meet the needs of the desperate crowd and he attends to task, engaging and healing for the entire day. He was not about to turn them away and take his leave when there was still more that could be done. He expected no less from his disciples. Don’t send them away; you give them something to eat.

I am sure that everyone is familiar with the children’s story Stone Soup. This story has found its way into the lore of many cultures and nations because its truth is profoundly simple. Some travelers come to a village, carrying nothing more than an empty cooking pot and ask for food. The villagers are unwilling to share any of their food stores with the hungry travelers. Then the travelers go to a stream and fill the pot with water, drop a large [stone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_%28geology%29) in it, and place it over a fire in the middle of the town square. One of the villagers becomes curious and asks what they are doing. The travelers answer that they are making "stone [soup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soup)", which tastes wonderful, although it still needs a little bit of [garnish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garnish_%28food%29) to improve the flavor, which they are missing.

The villager now does not mind parting with a few carrots and onions to help them out, so that gets added to the soup. Another villager walks by, inquiring about the pot, and the travelers again mention their stone soup which has not reached its full potential yet for it is need of salt to enhance the flavour. The villager hands them a little bit of [seasoning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasoning) to help them out. More and more villagers walk by, each adding another ingredient. Finally, the stone is removed from the pot, and a delicious and nourishing pot of soup is enjoyed by all. Although the travelers have thus tricked the villagers into sharing their food with them, they have successfully transformed it into a tasty and nutritious meal which they share with the donors. Some versions of the story include musicians bringing their instruments to the square so that there could be singing and dancing following the meal. The entire town feasted and celebrated together in a spirit of harmony and unity. They have moved from hoarding, to meager offering to abundance. Perhaps the feeding of the multitude is Matthew’s own version of stone soup.

Some students of the scriptures suggest what took place that day was less a miracle and more akin to the first pot luck supper. Let’s just say for arguments sake that half of the crowd came that day with a similar meal as the one proffered: some leavened bread and dried fish; perhaps some figs and olives. And as more and more people opened up their clenched fists and were willing to share there was more than enough for all. I don’t know for sure how 5 small loaves and 2 fish were able to be mass produced such that everyone had their fill, and perhaps this is the lesser point of the story. Jesus instructs his disciples to do something rather than take the easy way of doing nothing. He tells them to take responsibility. You see a need, so now come up with a solution to address it. Don’t just see it as someone else’s problem. Perhaps this is the most challenging part of the text.

If we take the passage at face value it suggests that fatigue, grief and even the enormity of the problem are no excuse. It is like trying to silence the dehydrated philosopher in need of a hug only so that we can attend to our own needs. It simply is not good enough. The demands of discipleship infer that in most things we must find a way to give an inch; to proffer kindness, sustenance and justice. This story of the feeding reminds that it is small things done with great love that makes the difference. Because where there is love, there is the power of grace.

The story is told of a woman who lived in a small village in France.

Trained as a nurse, she devoted her life to caring for the sick and needy.

After many years of kind and selfless service to the village’s families,

the woman died. She had no family of her own, so the townsfolk planned a

beautiful funeral for her, a fitting tribute to the woman to whom so many

owed their lives.

The parish priest, however, pointed out that, because she was a

Protestant, she could not be buried in the town’s Catholic cemetery. The

villagers protested, but the priest held firm. It was not easy for the

priest either, because he too had been cared for by the woman during a

serious illness. But the canons of the Church were very clear; she would

have to buried outside the fence of the cemetery.

The day of the funeral arrived, and the whole village accompanied the

woman’ s casket to the cemetery, where she was buried--outside the fence.

But that night, a group of villagers, armed with shovels, sneaked into the

cemetery. They then quietly set to work--moving the fence.

We will never know for sure what happened that day when a meager lunch fed so many. Surely it can be argued that Jesus had the power to transform the five loaves and the two fish into substance for many and to spare. But maybe what Jesus did that day was to transform the disciples; encouraging them to try to respond to a challenging situation and not simply dismiss it because it seems impossible. Maybe it was a kind of enacting of stone soup where people unclenched their fists to share so that all might have. This kind of thinking may point us into a new directions.

  When we are convinced that we do not have enough of what it takes; that we are unequal to the task or we want to distance ourselves from any responsibility we become barriers to possibility and grace. But if we just give an inch and ask the right questions, like who has something to offer that might be used for a greater good. And we nudge another to unclasp the clenched fist and risk sharing a little, there may be incredible returns when God seasons our compassionate actions with grace. This is our faith. This is our hope. May it also be our way of being. Amen.

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