

**Enough**  
**John 6:5-14, 35**  
**Exodus 16, 1 Kings 17**  
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At this point, you are exceedingly familiar with these passages from John 6, the story of the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus' subsequent assertion, "I am the Bread of Life." A few years ago, I had this idea to ask multiple preachers to address the same scripture several weeks in a row. The most interesting parts of our scripture have so many lessons to impart to us, and often it takes different preachers, different interpreters, to bring a variety of those lessons to light. I appreciate you letting me give this experiment a shot. It seems like it's gone well, and we may try it again sometime, even if it has included some "learn as you go" moments.

One thing I learned is that, if we do try this again, I either need to go first or to impress upon those who do preach first not to set the bar too high. Two weeks ago, Kristen Muse from Hayes Barton Baptist introduced this text and this idea with a message that covered the scripture pretty thoroughly, accentuating that this is a story of abundance and that Jesus is in the "here and now," the ordinary of this passage. Last week, our own Steve Sumerel really illustrated that latter point with a vivid story from his own life.

The great movie trilogies—the *Godfather* movies, the original *Star Wars*, *Back to the Future*, or the true *Indiana Jones* movies—all follow a similar pattern. The first movie establishes the characters and the setting, functioning exceptionally well as a standalone feature while also whetting our interest for what may follow. The second movie takes the greatest risks, finding a way to stay true to the themes and character of the first movie while also breaking new ground and pushing the envelope. And the third movie tries to accomplish what numbers one and two did—to stand alone as a feature and to break new ground—while also functioning in the world they've created and somehow offering a satisfying conclusion to the trilogy's overarching arc. It's a tall order, and the third movie, even when highly regarded, never quite seems to measure up.

I'll tell you upfront that I don't have any stories about working alongside Millard Fuller on the second ever Habitat for Humanity house. You may be in for a letdown.

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I do have some missions experience building and repairing houses, both with Habitat and beyond, but I think I've spent more time serving in soup kitchens and food pantries. At this point, I've lost track of the number of trips I led that primarily centered on feeding people. I've worked in pantries aimed at families who could pay rent but not much else, rooms filled with groceries and produce that were intended to be brought home, stored, and prepared. I've cooked in kitchens that served the homeless with three hot meals a day, shifts of cooks rotating through each meal from 5:30 in the morning until 8:00 at night like a busy restaurant. I've even served in a kosher cafeteria that targets an aging Jewish population that can no longer cook but can't afford assisted living. There are a lot of organizations out there dedicated to feeding different kinds of people in different ways.

When I was in divinity school, someone asked me what Worldwide Problem—what massive issue that seems insurmountable, things like poverty and war and environmental concerns—what Worldwide Problem I'd most like to see us solve. My answer then, and now, was the problem of hunger.

It just seems like, when it comes to food, there should be enough. In all of the soup kitchens and pantries where I've served, the problem was never "having enough food." There were problems with having enough time or enough volunteers. There were self-inflicted issues over dress codes and power struggles. Logistical problems, tiny kitchens, and health code dilemmas...but never do I recall a problem having enough food. One kitchen I served in had prepared an entire dinner when 20 pizzas unexpectedly showed up, leftovers from a church event, and that night they served residents and workers twice over. The food is out there.

And, as we know, the hungry are out there as well.

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When I was little, I think I most commonly heard today's scripture called "the miracle of the loaves and fishes." Sunday school crafts focused on those loaves and fishes, always five rolls and two fish. The miracle was located within Jesus, of course, but it was also centralized in the meal itself, the seven small items that fed a multitude.

As I grew older, I began to hear this passage, more and more often, called "the feeding of the 5000." That's a perfectly appropriate title, of course, and its alliteration rolls right off the tongue. It accentuates how massive this crowd was, therefore emphasizing the impressiveness of what Jesus has done. But "feeding of the 5000" is missing something from the title I learned as a child. It's missing the miracle.

Also as I grew older, I began to hear a different interpretation of this miracle. Sometime when I was in college, there was a push to explain exactly how the crowd on the mountainside went from one boy's lunch to twelve overflowing baskets. Did Jesus make the food appear from nowhere? Did the existing food regenerate somehow as it was being broken and shared? It wasn't enough to know that Jesus had fed people; these theorists wanted to explain *how* he fed those people.

So interpreters of the text started to suggest that, in reality, there were lots of people who had brought a lunch that day when they came to hear Jesus. They just didn't want to take their food out in front of all of these strangers—maybe out of politeness, but more likely because they sensed what the disciples sensed, which was that there were a lot of hungry (maybe even angry or impatient) people gathered. Then, when this sweet little boy offers up his lunch, it melts the hearts of the cynical adults who are now willing to break out their own meals and share them as needed. As it turns out, so many people brought food that there's enough to feed the masses.

The "real miracle," this interpretation concluded, was not that Jesus made food appear out of thin air. It was that he helped this crowd of humans act humanely, he instigated a scene of mass sharing and selflessness. The problem with this interpretation, for me, is that it (like the name "the feeding of the 5000") downplays and undercuts the miracle itself.

Two weeks ago, Kristen preached that "this is a story of abundance" and that in this story, "Jesus is all about the ordinary." Somehow, in trying to accentuate that Jesus is in the ordinary, we have ended up with an interpretation that strips him of his abundance.

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Prior to this story, in our scriptures, we have seen God make food appear out of nowhere. When the Israelites wander in the wilderness, they begin to gripe about having nothing to eat, and God answers their complaints with manna from heaven. Later, as Elijah makes his way through his own wilderness, he encounters a woman who is nearly out of flour and oil to make bread, and yet by following his instructions, she ends up with jars of each that never give out. In each of these stories, there is no doubt that God is providing the food. In the story of the manna from heaven, it is undeniable that the flakes of bread have come from Yahweh—undeniable because there is no possible explanation of people sharing and undeniable because Moses himself tells us that this is what happens. The story of Elijah and the widow, likewise, would require remarkable interpretative gymnastics to suggest that the flour and the oil are coming from someplace other than God’s incredible influence in our world.

Our scriptures teach us that God can do things in our world that we do not understand, particularly when it comes to God’s providence. Belief in a God such as this means that it is entirely possible for the loaves and fishes on the mountainside to multiply in a way that we do not understand.

So...why, then, do some try to explain this scene in a way that suggests that the only miracle here is Jesus softening the hearts of those who had gathered? Well, there’s something unsettling about the idea of a God who makes food appear out of nowhere. It’s too much prestidigitation, too much sleight of hand. Our scripture shouldn’t lead to a characterization of Jesus as a magician, and so some analyses push back on the unbelievable.

But I also think there’s another valuable reason for this interpretation. There is a desire to recognize that this miracle—the miracle of the loaves and fishes—isn’t just about Jesus. It is also about those who are gathered.

When Jesus, a few verses later, says “I am the Bread of Life,” he is talking about *our lives*. He is telling those who are gathered—and, through the scripture, telling us—to believe in him, to come to him, to be gathered and given to and raised up by him. To live in him. These are the verbs that follow his statement, verbs of human life.

I believe in a God who provides food when there is none. But I also believe that we as humanity have to do the right things with that food in order for it to be of use—we have to approach it with wisdom and selflessness, to share and not to waste, to allow for the things which nourish us to multiply and spread. It is true with what we eat, but it is also true with all of the other blessings which God puts in our world.

There are always those who are hungry, but the problem never seems to be God not providing. The Bread of Life is there for all. The onus is on us. There is always enough food.

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One of the places where I've volunteered that feeds people is a church in New York City that hosts a breakfast every Saturday where they feed mostly homeless people in their gym. The Father's Heart is an extraordinary ministry.<sup>1</sup> When we served there, our group of teenagers and chaperones would show up around 9:00 AM, get oriented, and get assigned different jobs. The Father's Heart is a finely tuned machine, and there are plenty of jobs for everyone.

Some people would start cooking right away. At 10:00, the guests started coming in and sitting down at tables. A volunteer waiter would ask about any special menu requests, then bring a plate filled with eggs, potatoes, bread, and fruit. Someone else would pour coffee, juice, and milk. When the guest had finished eating, they had the option to receive more—as many plates as they wanted, all served to them at their table. While they ate, church members who volunteered weekly and who knew the different guests talked with them about their week and about their families. When a guest finished, yet another volunteer removed the trash, and a new guest came to sit down for the same experience.

Father's Heart is only open for an hour. During that time, they serve between 700 and 1000 guests, always offering every person as much as that person wants to eat. I've served there several times, and I've never seen them turn anyone away, not once. They manage to get every single person in the line through the gym.

During our orientation, the main point of emphasis was that the people waiting outside were guests. Some soup kitchens call their patrons "clients" or "diners" or even more clinically sounding labels. Father's Heart always told us, "These are guests in our home. We treat them as we would treat any other guests in any other home." Most other soup kitchens also had a lot of rules or limitations about what their guests could eat—no special requests, only one trip through the line. Father's Heart said, "If a guest in your house asked for seconds, you'd be glad to offer them and take the request as a compliment...and so do we." And the people at Father's Heart encouraged us to stop and talk to the guests along the way, telling us, "We'd love for you to get to know them." It was part of helping the guests feel like guests. It was part of letting them know that they were wanted.

Our group served in so many different places, but few had the feeling, the spirit, that Father's Heart had. It was a place where there was an abundance of food, which was important, but it was also a place that featured an abundance of warmth and love. We who volunteered immediately noticed the difference. We recognized what it meant to be part of giving in this way. We recognized a place where there was both enough food and enough caring.

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The miracle of Father's Heart, and the miracle of Habitat for Humanity, and the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and even the miracle of Elijah and the widow all work for the same reasons. They work because God is moving in our world, because God provides for us in mysterious and incredible ways, because God can do things that we do not understand and will never understand. And they work because the people involved in these events are willing to allow God to perform a miracle in their lives. They are willing to give and to care. They are willing to act truly selflessly.

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<sup>1</sup> I last worked here in 2019, pre-Covid. Assuming it has maintained much of the same spirit and structure, it is a phenomenal ministry. <https://www.hfny.org/affiliates/fathers-heart>

We are a part of the miracles that God performs in our world—a living, active, volitional piece of the astonishing things that God does. When we say that Jesus is in the ordinary of this story, the “ordinary” refers not only to the bread that feeds these people but also to the people themselves, to people in general. We make choices—significant choices, important choices, critical choices—that are part of the miracles that God performs.

As Kristen preached two weeks ago, this is a story of abundance. Our God exists abundantly in our world, overflowing with goodness in places where we cannot fathom how. As Steve preached last week, this is a story of God existing in the everyday, a story that repeats itself throughout our history and our present. Because God is abundantly everywhere, it means that God—the divine, the miraculous—is also in us.

That puts a tremendous responsibility on our shoulders—to share, to give, to feed, to provide, to act as God acts in these stories. But we know that God delivers the means for us to live into this responsibility, and we know that, with God’s help and guidance, we can fulfill the tasks that lie before us. We have enough. We can do enough...and God will do the rest.