

August 6, 2023

Matthew 14:13-21 5

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

An email note from my brother, Paul, serving in the Peace Corp in Kenya:

A couple weeks ago, one of the Form 1 (freshman) kids, a member of the school's badminton team, came by to see me as I sat on my porch watching the evening close in. This particular boy is the smallest kid on the team, and looks like a junior high student. It happened to be the first time he had approached me.

"I'm hungry," he said. "Do you have something to eat?"

This kind of request is infrequent in the small town I am from in southern Illinois. And it must have taken some courage for this boy to present the reality of "food insecurity" to an old white man he didn't know very well. But hunger, I find, gives voice to a variety of unusual questions. I gave the boy a loaf of bread, which was the only thing I had in the house.

And so it began.

Yesterday I had four boys who trooped to my apartment, and silently waited for me to say something. I asked them if the badminton coach had gotten them something to eat. They said no. I asked them if they had really asked him, before they came to visit me. There was only silence. I had a bunch of bananas in the house, so I gave those to them, but it wouldn't go very far to alleviate their collective hunger. And the writing was on the wall -- my visitors will inevitably increase.

My relationship with these boys is a conundrum with no adequate answer. These boys are not trick or treating -- they are trying to survive in an unfriendly world. And they will search for every ally they can to assist in this life they have been born into through no fault of their own. And my response? . . .

I voluntarily came to Kenya, after all, when I could have comfortably stayed in America and not been condemned for ignoring the needs of my neighbors. But I came to Kenya and am surrounded by people in such difficult circumstances that they do not care whether they acknowledge it or not, or whether you know it or not. The boys -- and the small children and the unemployed adults and the dirt-poor old folks -- are in desperate straits, and if they see any possibility that you can help them in some way, they are not

embarrassed to ask. And if you give something to anyone, you will soon find a multitude of folks in your face asking for similar generosity.

This is a difficult time. We are between harvests, and it will be August before the next crop of maize and beans will be ready. In the meantime, people are told to tighten their belts and patiently wait through the next month and a half of scarcity. How, exactly, do you tell a child they must wait for food? And how, exactly, do I, with my full bank account, justify not sharing that with others? -- others who are such a multitude that my contribution -- of any size -- will be just a drop in the bucket brigade of Hunger?

So where do I draw the line? A line must be drawn, because the need is so great for so many people on so many levels that it is difficult to even contemplate.

But what is my responsibility?

It is the perennial question that greets me every day on the streets and the classrooms of Lirhanda.

If you have an answer, let me know.

all the best, paul

The answer lies in the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000: “You give them something to eat.”

Re-tell the story

Disciples had worked hard; were tired. 5,000 people – an impossible task to feed them all. So, what are disciples thinking, when Jesus tells them to feed the crowd?

- Jesus gone off the deep end
- We don't have enough for ourselves
- Aren't we making them dependent?

Yes, it is miracle; all were fed. But, that's a “Bible-story”, not our reality. Hunger and homelessness is too big a problem for us to solve.

“What is my responsibility?”, as my brother asks. Jesus says to us, “You give them something to eat.” That's it. Give thanks to God for what we have and then share.

- Will this end poverty?
- Will this end hunger, end “the bucket brigade of Hunger?”
- Will this heal all the world's ills?

No. But, when we strive to be as faithful as Jesus, when we are willing to share from our gifts, sharing, even when we believe there's not enough for ourselves, God's promise is: at that moment, at that place, it will be enough.

Friends, we are called to feed our neighbor the bread of life. Sometimes the bread of life is actually bread. Sometimes it is a kind word or a helping hand. But every time you give, as Jesus gave, trusting in God, communion is served, union is formed, the body of Christ arises – alive and well.

Let us, in Jesus' name and to God's glory, open our hearts and our hands to give the world around us the bread of life that nourishes and sustains, trusting God to do the rest. Amen.