

AN OFFERING FAR TOO SMALL

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Grace Church in New York
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 22, 2018

The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and those who seek the Lord shall praise him. (Psalm 22:25)

John Hockenberry is an award-winning journalist, author, and on-air personality who stepped down from his responsibilities last year. Some time ago he wrote a book called Moving Violations, in which he tells of his journeys throughout the world as a war correspondent in some of the most dangerous places on earth. Remarkably, he did it all from a wheelchair, which is how he's gotten around since an auto accident rendered him a paraplegic over forty years ago.

In October of 1992 Hockenberry was in the African nation of Somalia, reporting on the chaos that ensued when the government collapsed. In his book he tells a heart-wrenching story about stopping at a feeding center that was filled with hundreds of emaciated children, most of them orphans. They sat in rows waiting to receive the last provisions the center had to offer: sugar-wafer cookies. Hockenberry noticed one thin boy of about five years old who was unable to reach any wafers. Every time the man passing them out came near the stronger boys sitting next to him would push him down with laughter and contempt. He laments that even there "in the middle of a crowd of famine-plagued Somali children, one boy still had to have the cooties." But he was drawn to the one starving child. Their eyes met, and he wanted to give him something to eat. He obtained a handful of wafers, put them in his lap, and rolled toward the boy. Then he writes:

He and all of the children began to come toward me in a wave. I tried to put the wafer in the little thin boy's hand but each time it was grabbed by other, stronger boys ... I grabbed another wafer, and another, but the same thing happened. The thin boy stared at me ... He was not able to get even one wafer from me. I could not get to him in the center of the crowd. He could not get to me ... I showed him my hands, which were empty. He looked at them, and then deep into my eyes. He knew he was dead. He knew he would not get the wafers ... It was as true an understanding of death as I have ever witnessed.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (6:30-44) we've heard a familiar story: the feeding of the 5000. It began when the disciples of Jesus returned to him from something like a business trip. They must have been exhausted, all of them, including Jesus. For weeks they had been traveling the countryside dealing with all sorts and conditions of people. Crowds pressed in on them wherever they went. Mark says that Jesus and the disciples had no leisure even to eat. Among the crowds were the contentious, envious Pharisees who were plotting Jesus' demise, and dogging his every step. What is more, Jesus suffered personal, emotional setbacks: he had been rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, and now grieved the recent, violent death of his fellow kingdom proclaimer, John the Baptist. So it was that they tried to withdraw from the crowds by taking a boat to a deserted place across the Sea of Galilee.

How easy is it for you to withdraw from the stresses of life? Is it possible for you to shut off your cell phone and get away completely? It isn't easy today, and it wasn't easy then. Not that Jesus had a cell phone, but the crowds of people that he'd been teaching discovered other means of tracking him down. They spotted him trying to make his way across the lake, they ran around on shore, and beat him to the other side. Can you imagine how Jesus must have felt when he pulled up to this lonely place and found waiting on shore to greet him the same crowds that he'd left? It

would be like opening the door to your secret vacation suite and finding your boss there: more deadlines, more commitments, more work demanded from one who had already handed out all that he seemingly had to give, more caring and concern demanded from one who already must have been emotionally and spiritually exhausted. Jesus had every right to respond with frustration, even irritation.

Jesus did not respond as you and I might have responded. Instead of exasperation, he looked at the crowd with compassion. Instead of rowing away he braced himself for another day's work. When the hour had grown late the crowd had swelled to at least five-thousand people. It was time to eat, but they were far from food. The disciples wanted to send people home. But Jesus had another idea: *You give them something to eat.* The disciples protested. They looked at the crowd and guessed it would take two-hundred denarii, or 16,000 of today's dollars, to buy enough bread for all of them. What did they have? Well, they looked in their lunch boxes and they declared, "*We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.*" It was an offering far too small. It wasn't enough. It wasn't even close to being enough.

Not having enough is perhaps one of our most deeply rooted fears. Enough what, you ask? You name it. In our personal lives, we fear not having enough money, enough love, enough happiness, enough time. For John Hockenberry in Somalia, what he lacked was enough food to give to all those starving children. So whether it's one person unable to press a single wafer into the hand of the starving boy who needed it most, or the disciples unable to feed five-thousand people with five loaves and two fish, these incidents of not having enough hold up a uniquely Christian mirror for us to see ourselves. We are the disciples of Jesus, and the crowd that needs to be fed represents all of the challenges we need to face today, including and especially the dividing walls of hostility that currently scar the world.

That phrase, "dividing wall of hostility" is painfully applicable to our time, even though I've drawn it from a two-thousand year old letter written by St. Paul to the Ephesians (2:11-22). Paul was referring specifically to the hostility between the Jews and Gentiles of his day, but we need not limit the concept to long ago and far away. We have no shortage of malice and hostility to contend with today. Do we have enough patience, persistence, good will, and generosity to heal what ails us? Can we feed five-thousand people with five loaves of bread? No, not by our own strength. We need God's help. That's the whole point. The Christian faith is initially not the story of human goodness and virtue and potential. It is the story of humankind's poverty, bankruptcy, and failure to build up God's kingdom on earth, even when we try our hardest, for all the right reasons.

In the opening paragraphs of his classic novel, The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne laments how "*the founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.*" Hawthorne recognized that even when we strive mightily to build the City of God, we don't have enough loaves and fish to get the job done. People die from hunger, and thus the cemetery. People steal from want, and thus the prison. We don't have enough goodness to create a new humanity out of the old. What a heavy message for a summer day.

Are we left with anything to do with our five loaves and two fish? Are we just left to wallow in our inadequacy? Of course not. "Bring them here to me," said Jesus to the disciples. Bring them here to me. When the disciples obeyed, when they gave the loaves and fish to Jesus, then came the miracle. Jesus took their inadequate offering. He blessed it. He broke the loaves, and gave them back so that somehow everyone had more than enough to eat. Indeed, they took up twelve baskets full of leftovers. How the multiplication of resources happened is not the point.

Whether it was a miracle of sharing, or whether it was a miracle of bringing something out of nothing, the point is the miracle happened because the disciples gave the loaves and the fish first to Jesus. They gave it all.

Do you see the connection between this story and the Eucharist? Do you see the connection between the five loaves and two fish, and the offering we make on Sundays? I'm thinking of the sentence in the Eucharistic Prayer that says, *And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee.* (*The Book of Common Prayer, p. 336*) At every Eucharist we present the bread and wine that represent the time and the toil and the talent of our bodies. Then we bring forward that which represents our souls: our money. We place on the altar the representatives of everything we are – the bread and the wine and the money – and we ask the Lord to take what little we have: take this inadequate gift of mine and multiply it. Take my nothing and make it into something. Take my sin and turn it into salvation. Take my death and turn it into life. Take my Good Friday and make it Easter Day. Take my inadequate offering.

Now this is not to say we should be *aiming* to make our offering inadequate. I am reminded here of a story about the church that recruited some new ushers to help collect the offering on Sundays. The newest of recruits was very eager. You might say that zeal for the house of the Lord consumed him. One Sunday he was passing the plates and took note that a certain parishioner, who was known for his great wealth, contributed precisely twenty-five cents to the offering. Nothing more and nothing less than one, single quarter fell from his hand and went clang in the silver plate. The new usher was brash enough to say to him, on the spot, "I've only been an usher for a short time, but you should know that even our champion miser puts a dollar into the plate." The wealthy man replied, "Mr. Usher, you are looking at the new champion."

I don't mean to imply that we are a congregation of champion misers. Quite the contrary, the people of Grace Church prove time and again to be remarkably generous. Even still, our offerings are inadequate to meet the needs of our church and community, to say nothing of the world. They are far too small. Even if the whole realm of nature were ours, it would be an offering far too small. We don't have enough. But fear not. This feeding of the multitudes, this central story of our faith that the four Gospels tell us six different times, this sacramental mystery that becomes present in each and every Eucharist teaches that when we offer to Jesus our very best, no offering is too small. Even the little we have can be the grist for the mill of his miracles.

So we do not lose heart in a troubled world. We do not throw our hands up in despair when the powers of death seek to do their worst. Instead, at this very altar today we stretch out our hands in faithful assurance that Jesus is able to reach us with the Bread of Life. God in Christ has breached the dividing wall of hostility so that we may be partakers of this Holy Communion, receive his most precious Body and Blood, and be made one body with him, so that he may dwell in us and we in him.

And being thus filled with his grace and heavenly benediction, we press on into the world with a strength not our own. We press on to the day when at last the words of the Psalmist are fulfilled: *The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and those who seek the Lord shall praise him.*