

# ***Inertia, Inventory & Initiative***

August 2, 2020

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

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## **Matthew 14:13-21**

*Now 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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

Jesus' feeding of the five thousand is one of the most familiar and popular miracles of our Lord. We know the story very well. Or do we? At a closer look one might find this is perhaps among the *least* understood of Jesus' deeds and teachings. Our misunderstanding of the miracle becomes obvious when we realize that it was badly miss-named. The feeding of the five thousand is a deed full of lessons in faith and ministry. Let us take a closer look and start at the beginning. Better yet, let us start *before* the beginning so that we might more fully understand.

The feeding can be understood as a series of events, each beginning with an "I." Though not immediately apparent to the casual reader the story begins on a very sad note, on a theme of *inertia*, as it was a time of weariness, great sadness and depletion. Jesus had endured a terrible series of events which began with his rejection in his home town of Nazareth. Homecomings are supposed to be joyous and proud events, but Jesus met rejection and derision instead. This sad event is immediately followed by the murder of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod. Jesus dearly loved and respected John, and he also knew that this killing foreshadowed his own fate. Jesus must have been terribly shaken by this horrible report, and his disciples certainly shared that grief. In times of sadness one naturally and rightly seeks out solitude so

that grief can be poured out to God and the spirit can rest. Jesus' third and great frustration was that the needed rest he so desperately sought was not to be found. As Matthew tells us, *Now 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.* There seemed to be no end to the sadness, and no end to the persistent crowds! We have all had times when desperately needed rest escaped us, and it is a most unpleasant experience.

If any of us had been in Jesus' shoes we would probably have called upon miracle powers to work out some kind of escape from the crowds, but Jesus had a better way. Matthew states the situation plainly: *When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.* First, *he saw*. These people were poor and hungry—longing for bread as well as a word of hope. It may seem a statement of the obvious to point out that Jesus saw them. How could he have not seen such a crowd gathered all around him? But is it not so simple as all that? We are very capable of being confronted with an unpleasant situation, and then acting as though we do not see it. We may see it with our eyes, but we move on quickly acting as though we have seen nothing. Jesus saw, and he cared. *He had compassion for them* and even began healing some of their sick. Jesus had come to serve, and though it was a time of exhaustion he could still sense that calling and answered energetically.

Perhaps this touches upon a sensitive matter for you. Many feel over worked. We hear talk of "compassion-fatigue", and it is easy to see how this can happen. Churches are notorious for overworking volunteers and I have often stressed the believer's responsibility to know when to say no to a request, and when to walk away for a while. It has never been God's desire that we work ourselves to death, and God has even given us a commandment to take one day off a week – a command which we generally ignore! Is Jesus' working in spite of a desperate need of rest an indication that we should never say no to a need? Life's many and varied situations call for wisdom on behalf of the believer and my first counsel is that one listen to God in those times. To say that one has no power to go in does not necessarily settle the matter. The witness of our Lord does show us that great ministry can still happen when one is totally exhausted.

Jesus was certainly depleted of all natural energy. He was tired, but God was not, and God was going to give all the energy needed for the work at hand. Are you tired? Today is Sunday, so I recommend a rest. But for other situations I urge you to call upon God for the strength which you will need to do God's work. We know what it is like to go beyond one's limits of strength. I think of anyone who has raise an infant! Now *that* is an exhausting endeavor which frequently leaves one sleepless and weak. But God gives strength, for the care of babies and for the doing of the Kingdom's work. Yes, God's work can be exhausting, but God tries to give us more time off than most of us ever take, and there will most certainly be times when we are called to rise up to a task, even though we barely have the energy to stand. But do stand up. God can take it from there!

The great feeding began on a somber note, which is tempting to ignore because of its sadness. The second step is often overlooked because it seems unimportant or unnecessary. Things were looking troubled there in the Galilean wilderness. The crowds lingered and were growing hungry, and this was a problem which could not be brushed aside. The disciples had an idea, but it was not much of an idea, as it did not deal with the crowd's hunger in an effective way. *When 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."* This is the sort of idea which most of us would suggest, and we would speak with stern conviction how "we are only trying to be realistic!" By worldly standards this was a realistic approach, but it would also need to be admitted that it would not work. A large crowd descending upon small villages late at night seeking food, and most of the crowd probably having no money, is not a situation which is likely to end well! But we worldly people would wisely stroke our chins and solemnly state that life is hard and this is the best outcome possible.

Jesus wanted nothing to do with this cruel realism and shocked the twelve with a stunning command. *Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."* Needless to say, they were speechless. How could they begin to feed such a crowd? Our Lord's command caused them to begin the second phase of the miracle. After the sadness and fatigue of inertia came the work of some basic bookkeeping. They were to take inventory. But how can one take inventory when there is no inventory to be counted? They, convinced that they had nothing to offer, answered *We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.* We have nothing, they declared, and then qualified that remark with the mention of an apparently meaningless collection of a few bread rolls and fish. We know the rest of the story, and we know that the disciples *did* have real treasure to share. Or have we ever really learned that lesson?

Most of us are accomplished at the skill of poor-mouthing. When word goes out of a great need in the Church, a chorus is often heard of our *inabilities* and *lack* of assets. "I don't have the money, I'm no leader, I can't teach, I can't organize, and I don't have the time!" This is a sad song, and saddest of all, we generally believe it! We spend little time consciously taking inventory of our gifts and abilities because like the disciples we are convinced we have none. We also know that admitting to those assets before God would obligate us to service, and that is another scary matter. But the truth is that we are a people of great wealth. We have great financial resources, beautiful homes and cars, and retirement policies which give us an abundance of time freed from working for an income. We can read, write, teach, sew, cook, compute, build and do a host of other things.

In doing a self-inventory we must also look to the less tangible assets of our lives. We all have special skills given us by God. Here again we are quick to deny these talents, as we can often not see them in ourselves. This is where friends and fellow Christians

must step in and tell us of our abilities. We also have experiences which have shaped us and equipped us for service. Folks might say, "All I ever did was raise a family," or "I'm only an old widow/widower, or perhaps a divorcee." Do you realize how these experiences train us for service! There are so many moms and dads in need of an encouraging word and kind deed as they raise their families. All around us we see people facing the hardships and heartaches of losing a mate through death or divorce. What powerful ministry can be accomplished by those who can stand alongside these struggling people! Greatest of all is the gift of faith. "I'm no Bible expert," is the common refrain, but no one is calling us to be Bible experts. We are responsible to share only that which we know—and we know a lot! We are equipped with a testimony of a Church family which has helped us through life and of a Savior who has given us joy, even in the darkest times.

Not only do we have an inventory, but our shelves are overflowing, and having made a count of that inventory we need to bring that inventory to the Master. Jesus called the disciples and he calls us: "*Bring them here to me.*" This may seem like a trivial matter. Each week we pause to dedicate our offering to God and place it upon the altar. Too often and too easily this ritual comes to feel like merely that—a ritual, lacking in any real meaning or power. Couldn't we just take the collection down the hall to the office and lock it up for counting, rather than leave it out on the altar? But to fail to entrust the offering to the Lord is to risk missing out on the necessary blessing. And when our offerings seem meager, we need to pray all the more! When the St. Luke's congregation began some hundred years ago, they gathered as a small number of people with only a small offering, but they knew to entrust that offering and themselves into the Savior's hands, and with Jesus' blessing that offering grew. Now we find ourselves in a fine sanctuary and a building equipped for ministry. More recently we look to *Lunch with Luke*, which began by feeding four people one Wednesday afternoon. We entrust those small beginnings to God for a blessing, and this is *not* mere ritual.

The feeding of the five thousand, like many miracles, begins in a time of human weakness and *inertia* which causes us to trust in God's power and not our own. The challenges of life with Christ lead us to moments of need when we must pause and take *inventory*, and then offer those talents and treasures to God. But this miracle, and so many mighty works for God, require a final ingredient: *initiative*! Here we find a great missing link and the reason that many more miracles do not happen. Potential miracles evaporate for lack of someone stepping up and taking initiative. The disciples stepped forward, and so the multitude was fed. To this you may object and insist that Jesus dragged them forward! True enough. God graciously does that to us on many occasions, and we should be glad that God does. They brought Jesus the food for his divine blessing, and then the disciples took upon themselves the task of distributing that food. *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.* This may sound like a minor task, but among five thousand plus people distribution is no small matter. They also put themselves on the line as they were among the crowd, and these people might not react well if the bread ran out! But such was not the case as there were abundant leftovers.

I have frequently described the walk of faith as a matter of simply being aware of the next step you know God wants you to take, and then taking it. Initiative is taking those difficult first steps which begin new adventures. We can all remember many first steps in our lives: signing up for an activity or project, going out for the team, enrolling in a school, enlisting in the armed forces, saying "I do," having a family, volunteering. We can all tell stories of nerve-wracking moments as we stepped forward into uncertainty. For too many folks, life becomes a game of keeping all such steps to an absolute minimum and avoiding the uncertain. While this is understandable, it is very sad and devastating to the life of faith. Not all these big steps have ended well, or at least as we would have hoped, but imagine what life would be like if we avoided all such steps of faith?

This past week our Christian Education committee took a step of faith by trying an on-line Vacation Bible School. This is very new territory for the bunch of us. Many entered the endeavor with sweaty palms, but I have long recognized that sweaty palms in the service of Christ is usually a very positive sign! It was tempting to say that we didn't know what we were doing, as there were many new and uncertain factors, but this would not be accurate. We knew a lot. We knew that God wanted this done and that if we stepped forward it would happen. (Yes, we knew that last part by faith.) This will probably not become a nationwide broadcasted TV series, but we are certain that young people will be touched by the Good News, and that is miracle enough.

Initiative is the key, and often missing ingredient. The story is told of the preacher who told the congregation that he had good news and bad news about the building fund. The good news was the money is all there. The bad news is that most of it is still in their pockets! The difference is the initiative which takes the available inventory and presents it to God for divine use, and at the same time presents ourselves, the givers, for God's use and blessing. Think of the steps of faith which you have taken in your life. We often look to *Lunch with Luke* as the St. Luke's miracle story, and well we should. We are presently sidelined, but satisfied that God will put us back into the game in good time. We do serve a mighty God.

The feeding of the five thousand is *not* about sitting back and watching Jesus do miracles. How I wish the story was more popularly known as "The Disciples Feed the Five Thousand," for that is a more accurate description. Merely watching Jesus do miracles misses the point. The feeding of the multitude tells us that no matter how low our mood, no matter our alleged poverty, and no matter our cowardice, Jesus is calling us to do great things. Let us take that next step.