

The Hunger Game

Do you know how many schools there are in the Big 10 Conference? Years ago this would have sounded like a dumb question. But it is not anymore. The answer is that there are currently 14. League officials defy common sense and continue to call it the Big 10 because it's hard to give up tradition and a catchy title even when the title doesn't match up to the facts of the story.

Now, when I ask you how many people Jesus fed in the story of *The Feeding of the 5,000*, that sounds like a dumb question. But the answer is, nobody knows. We do know it was well over 5,000. Matthew reports that the number of those who ate was about 5,000 men *besides women and children*.

That's a lot more than 5,000. But because it is too cumbersome to call the story *The Feeding of the 5,000 Men Plus an Undetermined Number of Women and Children*, we continue to use Feeding of the 5,000 as the standard title.

This brings two questions to mind: 1) Why did the Biblical writers estimate the number of men and not the number of women and children? 2) Why did they differentiate the demographics at all? Can you imagine anyone doing that today: Attendance at the Brewers game today was 22,370 men besides women and children.

It seems obvious there is some ancient Middle Eastern sexism at work here. Rather than buy into that, I refer to this incident as the *Feeding of the Multitude*, even though *Feeding of the 5,000* is a much catchier title.

The fact that this is one of the few stories that appears in all four gospels shows that its message is absolutely central to understanding who Jesus was and what he taught.

Jesus had been traveling about the cities and villages in Galilee proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness. After many days of this exhausting work, he got some terrible news about John the Baptist, and he feels the need to get away from the crowds so he could rest, recover, and spend some time in quiet reflection. So he got into a boat and sailed away to a deserted place.

But the crowds got wind of where he was going, and by the time Jesus arrived, a huge crowd was waiting for him. He could not have been pleased. Yet despite his exhaustion, he had compassion on them and cured the sick all day long.

As evening drew near, the disciples found themselves drawn into a very serious game. The rules of the game were simple. Here you are out in the wilderness, far away from the nearest populated community, surrounded by thousands of people. Many of these folks have not eaten all day. It appears they have not even thought about what they are going to eat.

The object of this game is to figure out what you are going to do about this. The disciples are faced with four possible choices. They must answer carefully, because this is a game with grave consequences: the welfare of thousands of men, women, and children depend on what they decide.

Option #1: It's the crowd's problem, not yours. These people are responsible for their own actions. Jesus did not ask them to come out here into the wilderness; he was trying to get away from them. They came uninvited.

Jesus never promised to provide food for them. He and his disciples were not a food pantry for the whole countryside. Their mission was to teach and to heal and to share the good news. That is all they promised and that's all that could be expected of them.

How dumb can you be to come all the way out here in the wilderness without making any plans for what you are going to eat? That was the crowd's decision and they will have to face the consequences of their irresponsible action.

Option #2: Take advantage of the situation. The law of supply and demand gives you a rare opportunity. You have a large, captive market desperate for a commodity. You've seen the price you have to pay for a hot dog once you've paid your way into a major league ballpark? If you want to eat, you have no choice but to pay it.

Similarly, if you can organize a quick trip to a couple of the nearest towns for food supplies, you can bring it back and pretty well name your price.

You will have to move quickly, and it might even be too late, but it's worth the gamble. It will allow you to build up a fund that will put to a good purpose. You will be able to expand your ministry and to reach and serve greater numbers of people in a larger area.

Option #3: As much as you would like to help, admit that it is just impossible. You do not have the resources out here in the wilderness to feed that many people on such short notice.

Perhaps you can say a prayer for them, send them off with some words of encouragement. Maybe you can even suggest some places they might try to find food. But, realistically, you're in a desolate place and it's going to be tough for you to get enough for yourselves to eat, let alone take care of all these people.

Option #4: Have compassion. Do whatever you can for the people, despite the odds. Give it your best shot and see what happens.

The disciples immediately went with the easiest choice--#1. Not our problem. The disciples came to Jesus 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."

There's nothing cruel or malicious about their suggestion. Just being practical.

But Jesus winces. Wrong answer. "They need not go away," he says. "You give them something to eat." Jesus says it is not just their problem; it's your problem, too. Yes, people make foolish choices and get themselves into bad situations. That's part of being human. That doesn't mean we turn our backs on those in need.

The disciples then change their answer to #3. "Okay, we get it. It's part of our mission to help where we can. But this is beyond us. We don't have enough resources. All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish. What good will that do among so many?"

Jesus winces again. Wrong answer. What have they just seen happen in this deserted place? Jesus was exhausted by his ministry. At the end of his resources, he sought to get away to rest and recharge so he could get back at it. The crowds would not let him. They hounded him all the way into the wilderness.

Yet when he went ashore and saw the great crowd, he did not despair. He did not say, "I've done what I can; I've got nothing left." He did not say, "What good can one person do among so many?"

Matthew reports that when Jesus saw the crowd and their need, he had compassion for him. He rolled up his sleeves and went to work to do whatever he could

for them, despite the odds. He determined to give it his best shot and see what happens.

That is what he expected his disciples to do with the hungry crowd. "Show some compassion. Bring what you have, as meager as you think it may be. Let's start with that and see what happens."

What happened was that people were fed. It turned out that the resources available were far greater than the disciples had calculated. The correct answer to the crisis posed by hungry crowd in the wilderness was #4: Have compassion. Give it your best shot and see what happens.

That is the model for the Christian in all settings, all situations, all crises. In fact, it's not just a model; it is a commandment. Jesus did not suggest this course of action the disciples. He did not advocate for it.

He commanded them, "You give them something to eat." He didn't want to hear any excuses. For a follower of Jesus, there is only one correct answer to the Hunger Game.

That Hunger game was not just a one-shot deal played out on the desert hills surrounding the ancient Sea of Galilee. It is played every day in this world. People are in crisis. People are hurting. They are hungry. They live in squalor, without hope in an unforgiving world.

The question of the Hunger game remains the same, and it is posed to every one of us: "What are you going to do about that?"

The four possible answers remain the same. Every day, Christians make the same mistake as the disciples, and also add one that the disciples did not make.

Like the disciples, we often choose option #1: *It's their problem. Send them away to deal with it. People need to take charge of their lives. We can't be bailing out everyone who runs into some bad fortune, especially if a share of it is caused by their own bad behavior.*

And every time, Jesus winces and says, "Wrong answer. You give them something to eat."

There are Christians who believe it is not our job to be involved in social justice. Our mission is to teach religious doctrine, to bring sinners into the fold, and harvest souls for Christ, not to be concerned about earthly matters.

And every time Jesus hears this, he winces and says, “Wrong answer. You give them something to eat.”

Unlike the disciples, we sometimes choose option #2. We are willing to offer something to those in need as long as we can get something out of it. Many well-known evangelists of our time have had a field day exploiting the law of supply and demand.

They make fortunes off those who are desperate and vulnerable. They accumulate wealth and power, and build media empires, megachurches, and large followings, the better to increase the scope of their ministries.

I have had conversions with pastors and others who do not understand why we at St. John’s go to all the expense and effort of televising services or why we conduct worship services at so many health care facilities in town. We are not making any money from these activities, or getting a lot of new members. In fact, they are a bit of a drain on our resources.

Why do we do them? Because Jesus said, “You give them something to eat.”

Like the disciples, we often choose option #3. As much as we would like to help, we throw up our hands and say, “It is just impossible. We simply do not have the resources to do all that is being asked of us.

We have a hard enough time just staying afloat, looking after ourselves. There is so much need and want in the world. So much hunger. So much disease. So much poverty. So much warfare and violence.

Again, we don’t have the resources to cope with that. All we have is five loaves of bread and 2 small fish, and what is that among so many? It’s hopeless.

So we say a prayer for those in need. Try to give some spiritual comfort. Maybe suggest some place they can go for help.

And every time we do that, Jesus winces and says, “Wrong answer. You give them something to eat.”

Something different happens to a congregation, to a church. when we choose option #4. When we take seriously Jesus' command to give them something to eat. The presence of Jesus in our lives shows us that there is far more here than meets the eye. When love and compassion and self-sacrifice and thanksgiving come into the picture, we discover we have far more resources than we imagined.

Here we thought we had only a handful of crusty little loaves of bread and a couple of fish—not nearly enough to do the job. The love of Jesus appears among us and breaks into our hearts, and changes who we are and how we think and act, and suddenly we find that we have the resources to meet the needs.

They were here all along. We just got caught up in the anxiety and self-centeredness that blinded us to that fact.

When we take Jesus on faith, we find, as the disciples did, that we do not live in a world of scarcity. This is not a case of either us or them. Even in tough economic times, we have been given so much. We have all we need on this planet to feed everybody, to provide decent health care for everybody, to eradicate disease, poverty, and war in this world.

We don't live in a world of scarcity; we live in a world of plenty, as long as people realize that and stop mindlessly chasing after ever more material goods and entertainment, trying to stockpile it for ourselves. The resources are there.

We need the story of the Feeding of the Multitude to show us the truth—that there is far more in our world than meets the eye; that we live in a world of abundance, and that Jesus can inspire us to pool our resources to put this world back together.

Jesus fed the multitude because people were hungry. In need of healing. In need of life. And so he gave it to them, because sharing, healing, and giving life is what Jesus is all about.

I pray that as God's faithful people Christians in our land would stop making Jesus wince with our answer to his command: You go and feed them. That in Jesus' name, we would finally win the Hunger Game.