

"TWELVE BASKETS FULL"

October 8, 1989

TEXT: John 6:9: "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish but what are these for so many people?"

Do you ever have the feeling that, somehow or other, life is too much for you? Have you ever read the paper, or watched TV and felt the world was falling apart around you and there was nothing you could do about it? Look at Friday's Milwaukee Journal, for instance. Among other things it contained these stories: Israeli cabinet rejects peace plan, hijackers threaten to blow up plane, nine die in Virginia nursing home fire, two possibly related gunfights on the North Side of Milwaukee, the Jim Bakker trial, and the Marathon County Dairy Princess who is accused of strangling a high-school classmate. About the only good news was that the Cubs evened up the National League Playoffs.

When we read things like that, day after day, week after week, it is no wonder we sometimes get discouraged. "What's the world coming to?" we wonder. "What can anybody do about it?" And, more specifically. "What can I do? After all, I'm just one person, and the problems are so enormous, so complex." Or perhaps it is some personal problem that seems to be more than you can handle. Something at home, or at work, or having to do with your health. And you begin to wonder, "Was Shakespeare right after all? Is life just 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'? Where is God in all this? Why doesn't He do something? Does He even care?"

Those are hard questions. And more and more people are asking them. But there are answers. Answers which are found in this morning's scripture, where we read about the feeding of the multitude, the only miracle, by the way, that is found in all four Gospels. As the story opens, we find Jesus and his disciples going across the Sea of Galilee, presumably to get a little rest. Even Jesus, you see, needed relief from life's stress now and then.

But the crowds were not to be put off. Eager to see more miracles, they followed him around the top of the lake, and, as they went, their number was apparently swelled by a Passover caravan on its way to Jerusalem. By the time they finally caught up with Jesus, they were hot, hungry, and exhausted. And, instead of being angered by their inconsiderate pursuit, Jesus was touched by their need. His only thought was how to refresh them. And he turned to Philip and said, "Where can we buy bread that these may eat?"

Does God care? Of course He cares? Even when we are victims of our own foolishness, God cares, just as Jesus cared. Surely that is at least part of what this story is all about. When God sees His children in need, like Jesus, He wants to help. But what can He do? He can not just step in and "whomp" up a miracle as one of the angels urges him to do in God's Trombones. Not and still respect our much-prized freedom. Not if He wants us to take responsibility for our own actions. So, even though God wants to help, He needs someone to give Him a hand.

In this morning's story, that is where three very ordinary people come into the picture. The first was a woman who was not even there. Certainly she had no idea that she was about to be part of a miracle. She was just doing the best she could at the job life gave her. And, when her young son went off that morning, she did what she had probably done many times before. She made sure he had a nourishing lunch to take with him. Five barley loaves, more like little rolls really, and two small fish.

God's second helper was the little boy, himself. Though he was no doubt pretty hungry --little boys are almost always pretty hungry-- when he heard Jesus ask how the people could be fed, he offered to share his lunch. Never mind that five barley rolls and two sardines were a just drop in the bucket compared to an ocean of need. He never stopped to think about that. Nor did he think of his own hunger. He just wanted to help. Young people can be like that. I remember when I brought my wife home from the hospital with our second baby. As we came into the house, for some reason the baby started to cry. Three year old Philip, Jr., who was having lunch at the time, immediately asked, "Why's the baby crying?" And my mother, who was baby-sitting, answered, "Maybe he's just hungry, Dear." Without the slightest hesitation, Philip blurted out, "He can have some of my baloney sandwich."

That is what the lad in this morning's scripture did. He did not ask what good his little lunch could do for such a huge need. He did not worry about what he would eat if he gave his own lunch away. He did not say, "It is their own fault. If they'd brought lunch the way I did, there wouldn't be any problem." Like my little three year old, he just said, in effect, "They can have some of my baloney sandwich." He did not waste time worrying about the things he could not do. He just went ahead and did what he could. No wonder Jesus said, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven."

And that is where God's third helper came in. His name was Andrew. We do not hear very much about Andrew. Apparently, he did not have a very strong personality. In fact, his chief claim to fame seems to have been that he was Peter's younger brother. But right now God did not need Peter. Peter was strong, but impulsive, even a bit chaotic. There would be many times when God would need Peter, but right now he

needed Andrew. Peter would probably have laughed at the little boy who tugged at his sleeve and said, "Mister, they can have some of my lunch." Or he might have roared, "Get away, little boy! Can't you see we have a problem here?"

But Andrew did not laugh. And Andrew did not roar. Like Peter he, too, had no idea how such a small gift could be any help. He admits as much in this morning's text, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?" But he did not worry about that. He just said, "Here, Lord. It's not very much, but it's the best we've got." Somehow or other, Andrew knew from the very beginning that in Jesus of Nazareth God was at work, sufficient for any human need. It was he who heard the Baptist say of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God"; he who went to Peter and said, "We have found the Messiah"; he who also shared the news with Philip. He didn't understand what Jesus could do with one little boy's lunch, but he did not underestimate it either because he never underestimated Jesus.

And so, because three very ordinary people did the best they could with what they had, a miracle took place. Let us not worry about how. The early church obviously thought that Jesus multiplied those loaves and fish till they were enough for everyone, with twelve baskets full of left-overs. That would certainly have been a miracle. Today many people think the little boy's generosity, coupled with Jesus' compassion, led those who had food to share it with those who did not, perhaps an even greater miracle. But the "how" does not really matter. The important thing is that none of it could have happened without the help of three ordinary people.

And it is much the same today. We, too, find ourselves surrounded by enormous problems. It would be easy to say to ourselves, "There's nothing I can do. I'm just one person. My resources are small, hardly enough for me alone. I'm sorry the world's in a mess, but there's nothing I can do about it." And, if you said that, you would be right. Someone has said, "If you think that you can't, you won't." And the world will go on just the way it is, maybe getting worse, if that is possible. And perhaps you, too, will say, "Where's God? Why doesn't God do something? Doesn't God care?"

But do what you can. Offer God the best you have, and who knows what kind of miracle God might do with it? The application of that principle to our "Spirit of Helping" stewardship campaign ought to be pretty obvious, and I shall not belabor the point. Let me just remind you that without generous funding, and without the participation of a great many people, we would have no Sunday School, no choir, no Women's Fellowship, no First Congregational Church.

But there are other applications, too. In our family lives, in our jobs, in all the demands made upon our time and resources, in the world around us in all of its forms, we

have just two basic choices. We can moan, "What can I do, I'm just one person." Or we look for a way to help, saying, "I'm only one person, but what do you want me to do?" As the proverb says, "It is better to light just one little candle than to sit and curse the darkness." Does God care? See for yourself! Give Him the best you have, and watch Him turn it into miracles.