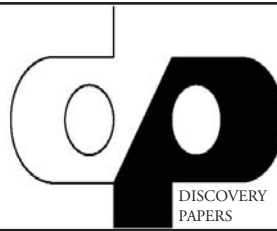


WAITERS AT THE FEAST

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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In C.S. Lewis' novel *Till We Have Faces*, considered by many to be his greatest work, Orual, one of the two protagonists, assesses her life: "I did and I did and I did—and what does it matter what I did?"¹ Such questions haunt many of us as well, especially those given to reflection.

A thorough consideration of the scriptures informs us that it doesn't matter so much what we do but what God does. Still, it matters what we do. But if it matters more what God does, is there a way in which the twain shall meet: what we do and what God does? In Mark 6:31-44, the disciples do something and Jesus does something—and God does a miracle. The story begins upon the disciples' return from a short-term mission in the region of Galilee.

Mark 6:31-44:

³¹And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) ³²They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.

³³The people saw them going, and many recognized them and ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them. ³⁴When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things. ³⁵When it was already quite late, His disciples came to Him and said, "This place is desolate and it is already quite late; ³⁶send them away so that they may go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." ³⁷But He answered them, "You give them something to eat!" And they said to Him, "Shall we go and spend two hundred denarii on bread and give them something to eat?" ³⁸And He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go look!" And when they found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." ³⁹And He commanded them all to sit down by groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰They sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. ⁴¹And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food and broke the loaves and He kept giving them to the disciples to set before them; and He divided up the two fish among them all. ⁴²They all ate and were satisfied, ⁴³and they picked up twelve full baskets of the broken pieces, and also of the fish. ⁴⁴There were five thousand men who ate the loaves."²

Jesus feels compassion for the crowd

After his disciples returned from preaching, casting out demons, and healing, Jesus summons them to rest in a secluded place in the wilderness.³ Ever since God rescued his people from Egypt, Israelites understood the wilderness to be a staging area for liberation movements. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, and Jesus went to the wilderness first to face Satan and then to pray (Mark 1:4, 12-13; 35). When Jesus takes his twelve disciples, who constitute the new Israel, with him to the wilderness, we sense that his kingdom-of-God movement is advancing.

Jesus wanted to escape the crowd, which was inundating his band to the extent that they had no time to eat, but the crowd tracked them down. Instead of sending the people away so that he and his disciples might rest and eat, Jesus spends time with them. He does so because he feels compassion for them. He feels compassion for them not simply because they are needy people but because they are "like sheep without a shepherd."

The Hebrew Scriptures refer to the leaders of Israel as shepherds. When Israel gathered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, Moses prayed that the congregation would not be "like sheep which have no shepherd." The Lord's answer to Moses' prayer was Joshua (Numbers 27:15-23). Later, the prophet Micah, anticipating the defeat of Israel and the death of King Ahab, saw the men of Israel scattered on the mountains, "like sheep which have no shepherd" (1 Kings 22:17). Then, the prophet Ezekiel, castigating the leaders of Israel, noted that the people of Israel "were scattered for lack of a shepherd," but he also envisioned the day when the Lord himself would shepherd his people through King David, a reference to the coming Messiah (Ezekiel 34:5, 12, 23).

In Jesus' day, the region of Galilee was ruled by Herod. Mark, in the previous passage, depicted Herod, who beheaded John the Baptist, as a pitiful excuse for a shepherd. Jesus has been preaching and teaching that the kingdom of God is at hand—that God is acting decisively to save his people from their enemies and break into this world with his healing, loving rule. He observes that the people of Israel are gathering in the wilderness, as in days of old. Jesus, with the words of Moses, Micah, and Ezekiel ringing in his ears, senses the moment and changes his plans, awakening the hopes of Israel for a new Moses, a new Joshua, and a new David.

Jesus fills the leaderless void not by healing people or casting out their demons or feeding them—at least at first. Instead, he teaches them—and teaches them many

things long into the evening.⁴

Jesus feels compassion for us

There are times when it seems as if no one cares for us—really cares for us—in an understanding way. Perhaps no person really can know us or care for our deepest needs. Mark's story tells us, however, that Jesus sees our need and feels compassion for us. Something about us—and something about our needy state—touches something deep in his heart.

James Bryan Smith, a professor at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, tells of being distraught because of his spiritual failures. While confessing his sins to God, he sensed the Holy Spirit telling him to be quiet and close his eyes. Smith writes:

When I closed my eyes I saw a lush green field, with the wind blowing through the high grass. Jesus was standing off in the distance and began walking toward me. As he got closer I began pleading once again, "I am so sorry, please forgive me. I know I can do better . . ."

Jesus never said a word in response. He just kept walking toward me, looking straight into my eyes. When he got near me he lifted me up from the ground and hugged me. For the next five minutes I was hugged by God. No words were spoken, but a feeling of warmth and love and acceptance permeated my lonely, restless heart.⁵

Jesus: He *feels*. He feels *compassion*. He feels compassion for *you*.

Jesus not only knows the biblical story, he also knows your story. He senses the moment—not only in the wilderness of Galilee but in the wilderness of your life. With the scriptures ringing in his ears, he connects your story to the biblical story. He knows the moments in your life: the inflection points, the crisis points, the turning points. He knows what you need when you need it. He leads us to the part of the biblical story we need or opens it to us in a relevant way. He shifts our perspective, and sometimes all it takes is a shift in perspective to change the course of a life. He gives us insights, thoughts, impressions. He knows that we're like sheep without a shepherd, so he teaches us many things: to lift us, to guide us, to challenge us, and always at just the right moment, shaping us for his purposes.

The Lord spoke to me through Mark 6:34 when I went on a short-term missions trip to Bulgaria in 1992, a few years before I became a pastor. I taught in different churches that were populated by folks who loved Jesus but didn't know the scriptures. Everywhere I went, my heart went out to them and I kept saying to myself, "Sheep without a shepherd." I didn't know it at the time, because I went to Bulgaria not to be taught but to teach, but Jesus was teaching me, shaping me into a shepherd.

Jesus feeds the crowd

The moment is lost on the disciples.⁶ The disciples

sense two problems: the place is desolate, and the hour is late. The reasonable course of action, from their perspective, is for Jesus to send the people away so that they may buy something to eat. Jesus, on the other hand, sensing the theological significance of a leaderless crowd of Jews in the wilderness, casts the problems as opportunities.

To help his disciples understand what's happening, he tells them, "You give them something to eat!" Moses protested that he would be unable to feed the people of Israel in the wilderness, but the Lord assured him that he would provide (Number 11:13, 22-23). The prophet Elisha instructed his attendant when facing a similar predicament, "Give to the people that they may eat." The attendant, in light of the minimal resources on hand, protested, but the prophet assured him that he would be able to feed 100 men and that there would be some left over (2 Kings 4:42-44). The disciples, too preoccupied with their predicament to connect the scriptures to the moment, protest like Moses and Elisha's attendant. The disciples facetiously ask Jesus whether he wants them to spend money they don't have to purchase food. They estimate that it would take 200 denarii, which amounted to as much as a year's wages, to feed the crowd.

The disciples wanted Jesus to send the crowd away, but instead he instructs them to go away to see how much bread they have. They had facetiously asked him whether they should go away to spend what they don't have, and Jesus instructs them to go away to see what they do have. Now they have three problems: the place is desolate, the hour is late, and they have not the resources to meet Jesus' demands. Furthermore, they intended to eat what little they had. After all, they came to escape the crowd so that they might rest and eat. Because Jesus has catered to the crowd, the disciples still haven't been able to eat. Now, it appears to them that Jesus wants to feed a few people in the crowd with the food they had appropriated for themselves.

What is Jesus doing? First, he's giving his disciples time to connect the scriptures—the stories of Israel, Moses, and Elisha—to their plight. Second, he's connecting them with servanthood: inviting them to give away their minimal resources and trust the Lord for their needs.⁷ Third, he's connecting them to the apparent hopelessness of the situation: with five loaves and two fish, they are impotent apart from the Lord's provision. Finally, he's connecting them with their own experience of God's faithfulness, for Mark, in the previous sequence, reported that Jesus sent them out with minimal resources and with no bread at all—to preach, cast out demons, and heal the sick—yet they lacked nothing (Mark 6:7-13, 30).

Jesus commands the people in the crowd to sit down, and they break up, evidently at his behest,

into groups of hundreds and fifties. Why hundreds and fifties? Once again, Jesus, having sensed the moment, is helping his disciples sense it, for Moses in the wilderness chose men as leaders over hundreds, fifties, and tens. After the Lord liberated Israel from Egypt in the exodus, he miraculously fed them with manna from heaven in the wilderness. Likewise, Jesus, who is depicted in Mark as effecting a new exodus, miraculously feeds Israel in the wilderness—and does so by looking to heaven, where the manna came from. He gives the bread and fish to the disciples, who are able to feed the entire crowd. They serve as waiters at the feast. The hour is late, but time stands still. The place is desolate, but heaven makes it a banqueting table.

As in the case of Elisha's miracle, there are leftovers. In this case, the twelve disciples, who have already been depicted in Mark along the lines of the twelve tribes of Israel, collect twelve basketsful of leftovers. Yes, Jesus wants his disciples to know, and yes, Mark wants us to know: God is reconstituting and renewing Israel. Furthermore, the disciples, after feeding the crowd, return with more food than they went out with.

Mark gives us one more number to crunch: he reports that 5,000 men were fed. He says nothing regarding the presence or absence of women and children in the crowd. Why is he concerned with gender? Because men fight wars.⁸ When God gathered the people of Israel and miraculously fed them in the wilderness, he prepared them to conquer the occupants of the Promised Land. When Jesus miraculously feeds what appears to be an army in the wilderness, he awakens the memories of past battles fought and won. But in that he has shown no interest in defeating Rome, the present occupant of the Promised Land, and every interest in defeating Satan, Jesus' army will be different, and it will employ different weapons: the word of God and prayer instead of swords and arrows.

In one more way, Mark would have us look back to the Hebrew Scriptures. He reports that Jesus, as the "shepherd" of Israel, made the crowd literally "recline," or lie down, on the "green" grass. Why does Mark need to tell us the color of the grass? Because David wrote:

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters. (Psalm 23:1-2)

Mark subtly yet artistically lets us know: David's experience of the Lord becomes Israel's experience of Jesus, which becomes our experience of Jesus as well. Jesus is our shepherd; we shall not want.

The feeding of the 5,000 not only looks back to Hebrew Scriptures in order to show their fulfillment in Christ, it also looks forward to the upper room, where the Messianic shepherd, like the Lord in Psalm 23, prepared a table for his followers in the presence of

their enemies. In the wilderness, Jesus "took" the food, "blessed" it, "broke" the bread, and kept "giving" the food to his disciples. In the upper room, Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover, which commemorates the exodus. There, Jesus "took" some bread and, after "blessing" it, both "broke" it and "gave" it to his disciples. Also, after he had "taken" a cup, he "gave" it to his disciples (Mark 14:22-25). The feeding of the 5,000, then, positioned between the old exodus and the new exodus, tells of a greater feast—one that we all partake of when we come to the Lord's Table.

Jesus enhances our offering

Jesus, in his compassion for us, meets our need: he teaches us many things. In meeting our need, he shares with us his compassion for a needy world. He translates his compassion for us into our compassion for others.

Like the disciples, however, we have a host of reasons for holding ourselves back from a world in need. The place is desolate: the world is beyond help. The hour is late: we have little time. We have five loaves and two fish: we have few resources. And, well, Jesus seems all too eager to connect us with the hopelessness of our plight. What do we have to offer the world? Jesus tells us, "Go look!" We search and answer, "Not much." And, well, what about our needs? Shouldn't we use our limited time and resources to take care of ourselves? There are so many needs out there. It's overwhelming. How are we to even begin to know where to focus? And what difference will we make, anyway?

Jesus, we might like to know, has a different perspective. He sees the problems as opportunities. Maybe, then, our protests are more like excuses. What do we need? We need Jesus to share his perspective with us. How might he do it? For one, he nudges us, as he nudged his disciples, to connect with the biblical story, which tells us that that the world is not beyond God's help; that God's time is endless and his resources are limitless; that we can serve others while trusting that God will meet our needs; that Jesus is not asking us to do everything, just something; and that he takes what we do for his sake and enhances it to bless the world, which we thought was beyond help. Jesus not only connects us to the biblical story, he also connects us to our own story, which features seasons when we had very little of whatever we thought we needed yet discovered, because of the faithfulness of God, that we lacked nothing.

Mike Benkert, one of our elders, says, "One of the best things about being a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church is that no one tells you what to do. One of the worst things about being a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church is that no one tells you what to do." So as a pastor here at PBC, I have the freedom to follow my passions and choose where to direct my ministry. After my encounter with Mark 6:34 in Bulgaria, and after beginning my pastoral vocation, I felt strongly drawn to studying and teaching the scriptures but wondered if my emphasis

should be less on teaching and more on leading boots-on-the-ground ministries to the downtrodden. Such efforts are often called “compassion” ministries. I’ve never heard anyone call a teaching ministry a compassion ministry. Again, Jesus, and Mark 6:34, came to my aid: “When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt *compassion* for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and He began to *teach* them many things” (emphasis mine). The Lord showed me that a teaching ministry was—or could be—a compassion ministry. I could be a compassionate teacher.

Jesus asks us what we have to offer. We answer, “Not much.” He says, “Just right.” Our lack becomes his abundance. He takes our offering and enhances it. John Schreiner, who has some mental and physical disabilities, was a member of this church until he moved away a few years ago. He was out of work when he sent this e-mail to a group of friends:

The purpose for this note is to let you know that my search for a new part-time job is under way. For example, today I submit two applications to Taco Bell and a coffee shop. Tomorrow or Monday I will submit more applications to other places. I know in the Lord's timing he will provide a job. I want the job he wants. In other words, I don't want to work at Taco Bell if God doesn't want me to. So submitting applications is just seeking God's best until I find his best. Yes, this may mean I will go hungry for a couple weeks, but I know I won't die. Again, God will provide in his timing. Isn't this wonderful? God is speaking to me as I'm writing this letter to you. This is a time when he wants me to draw close to him. I bet you think I'm going to ask you to pray for me. No, instead, I want to pray for you.

Let's pray. Oh Lord, thank you so much for providing the best job for the people who have jobs. Thank you for providing for their needs in this way. I pray also that you will give them spiritual wisdom and understanding so that they will grow in the knowledge of you. I also pray that their hearts will be flooded with light so they will understand you have promise—a wonderful future to those who you have called. Amen.

Thanks for taking time for reading this letter, and have a wonderful day at work. Remember, God is there to help you do a good job. The Lord bless you.

What do we have to offer? It may not be anything more than a simple note or a humble prayer. Jesus will take it and use it. But you have to offer it. Jesus can't enhance what you don't offer. John Schreiner, by the way, believed that the Lord “is there to help you.”

Jesus shifts our focus away from what we don't have and on to what we do have. Do you have a few dollars? How about that? What might Jesus do with them? Do you have a little time, or not much time left to live? What might Jesus do with it? The hour I spent with my mother the night before she died was the best hour I ever spent with her. Do you have a little passion for something? What might Jesus do with it? Don't focus on who's not in your life; focus on who is in your life. What might Jesus do with these people? What might Jesus do with your broken life?

What do you offer? How do you offer it? When do you offer it? All these questions Jesus helps us with as well. As he helped the disciples, he helps us: he helps us sense the moment—what to do, how to do it, when to do it—even if what we sense only feels like a nudge, and even if it involves changing our plans. You might consider, based on this passage, feeding the hungry; teaching spiritually hungry people “many things”; inviting people to partake of Jesus, who gives us his body and blood; or opening your home and preparing meals for people. The meals don't have to be fancy or in a beautiful setting. Five loaves, two fish, and a desolate place worked for the disciples. Soup, salad, and a cozy apartment will work for you.

We have wondered, perhaps, whether we should protect our time and resources to take care of ourselves. But when we go out in the name of the Lord, giving what we have, we return with leftovers—with a deeper sense of the goodness and power of God, which translates into having more to give, for the more you know God, the more you have to give. When you serve in the army of Jesus, employing not weapons of the flesh but weapons of the spirit, you always return with more than you went out with.

A butterfly from heaven

Does what we do matter? What the Lord does with what we do gives it impact and makes it matter in an eternal way.

Recently, Conrad Shen, a member of Peninsula Bible Church, joined our team that traveled to Colombia to teach the scriptures to prison workers and pastors. Conrad rarely volunteers to teach, preferring to serve in behind-the-scenes ways. However, he thought that serving with the teaching team would enable him to see God work in new ways. Conrad prayed that the Lord would give him illustrations to communicate the concepts that he was presenting. He illustrated being a new creature in Christ by talking about how a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly. A few minutes later, a butterfly fluttered into the room. “After watching it fly around for a bit,” Conrad recalls, “I thought to myself, ‘I bet it's even going to land on me.’ But I didn't expect it to land on my face!” Sure enough, that's where it landed. Conrad continues:

I could feel the butterfly starting to crawl toward my mouth, and I thought it would be distracting to try and talk if it went in my mouth, so I brushed it with my hand, and it flew around and landed on the palm of my hand, staying there until the end of my sermon, for more than eight minutes! At the conclusion of the conference, several people shared how that illustration had impacted them. It certainly strengthened my faith, to be amazed at how the Lord would choose to reveal his presence in ways that I never could have imagined.

A butterfly from heaven? Conrad stepped forward, and the Lord blessed him. He also came back with a stronger faith, with more than he went out with. Follow

Jesus as he leads you to offer yourself to a needy world and believe that he will enhance your offering. Be a waiter at the feast. You give them something to eat. The Lord is your shepherd; you shall not want.

NOTES

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1956, 1984), 236.

² Literary structure:

A No time for Jesus and disciples to eat (31-32)

B Many saw, came from all cities; Jesus saw, felt compassion, taught (33-34)

C Disciples: Send them away so that they can buy something to eat (35-36)

X Jesus: "You give them something to eat" (37)

C' Jesus: You go away to see what you can give them (38)

B' All people recline in groups; Jesus looked up (39-41)

A' All ate with twelve baskets left over (42-44)

³ The adjective "secluded" (*erēmos*) is spelled the same as the noun "wilderness": the secluded place of Mark 6:30 is in the wilderness.

⁴ Earlier, when Jesus went to the wilderness to pray, he emerged with a renewed sense of his vocation to preach about the kingdom of God (Mark 1:38). In Galilee, his priority as the Messianic shepherd of Israel is to teach the people of Israel about the kingdom of God. Later, after journeying south to Judea, his priority will shift to bringing in the kingdom, at which point he will stop teaching and face his destiny.

⁵ James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 10.

⁶ When they earlier tracked Jesus down in the wilderness, they urged him to return to the city and resume meeting the demands of the people for healings and exorcisms, but he said it was time to move on. Now, they urge Jesus to disperse the crowd so that the people may get their needs met.

⁷ Later, Jesus will tell them that "whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant" (Mark 10:43).

⁸ John's telling of the story is explicit: the 5,000 men attempted to take Jesus by force to make him king, but he withdrew from them (John 6:1-15).

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