

# Bless, Break, Give

July 30, 2023

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

## Scripture

### 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.

## Sermon

There's a deep logic in this text, a deep pattern, a fundamental insight into the laws of God's economy. It's one of Jesus' most famous miracles, found in all four gospels. That's how central it was to the early Church. Thousands fed on the lakeshore with five loaves of bread and two fish. There were so many broken pieces of bread left over that it filled twelve baskets full. Now, we can try to wrap our minds around how something like this might happen and find a rational explanation. But that misses the point. There's more than math and miracles at work here.

Pay close attention to the verbs used to describe Jesus' actions. Jesus invites the people to sit down so that they can be served. That's what a gracious host does. *Here, sit down. Allow me to serve you.* With everyone seated, Jesus takes five loaves and two fish; he looks up to heaven, he blesses the loaves, then breaks them, and then gives them to the crowds. And all were fed.

Bless-break-give. That's the deep logic, pattern, and archetypal undergirding of God's kingdom. It's the secret, hidden way of God. Bless-break-give. *This, my friends, is the basic, fundamental law of God's economy.*

I'm intentionally using the word economy, taken from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means simply "household." *Oikos* is Greek for "house;" *nomos* is "law." *Oikonomia* refers to the habits or ways of the household. We find it throughout the New Testament. In God's *oikonomia*, in God's household, in the ordering of God's people in the realm of God's kingdom, the world works from a different set of rules, values, and expectations, not the values and rules of the

prevailing *oikonomia*, the household of Caesar. Life in God’s kingdom is different from Caesar’s kingdom.

God’s economy follows the pattern of bless-break-give. *This* is the foundational law of God’s economy, the way of life in God’s household. In God’s household, *this* is how the world truly works; indeed, this is how the world is supposed to work. *This* is the way Christians are to live. And *this* is how the Church bears witness to the gospel—blessing-breaking-giving.

Here’s how it works. We bless. That is, we give thanks to God for everything—everything: all that we have received, everything gifted to us, including existence itself, everything that provides for our nourishment and nurture, such as fish and a piece of bread. We bless or thank God for what we have received. All that we have is a gift. Nothing belongs to us. It’s not ours—nothing is. Did you know that in Gaelic, there is no possessive form? You can’t say, “This glass of water is mine.” You would say, “This glass of water is at me.” Because nothing is truly ours and because we are responsible for our neighbor, whoever our neighbor might be, we take what God has given us, and we break it—we fracture it, we tear it apart, we rip it apart, we divide it into two or three pieces or more. And then we give it away. We share it. We pass it on. Then someone else, your neighbor or a stranger, the stranger who is now your friend, finds themselves on the receiving end of a gift. In doing so, you’ve given that person an occasion to give thanks and bless God for what was received. Then after the blessing, they get to break it and give it away. And so, the cycle continues.

*This* is how God’s household, God’s economy, works. It all begins with blessing, with thanksgiving. It all centers on *eucharisteo*, the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” Eucharist. Presbyterians call it Communion or the Lord’s Supper. This table, this meal, this sacrament is a living symbol, a witness of God’s kingdom economy enacted through bread. That’s what’s happening here at the Table of the Lord, in bread that we bless-break-share. When we live eucharistically—blessing, breaking, sharing—we soon discover there’s more than enough to go around for everyone. Thousands are fed.

And unless we share what we have, there will never be enough for everyone, which is precisely Jesus’ point. [1] Jesus isn’t saying here to give away everything you have (at least not here); he’s saying share what you have. Stop hoarding. Share it—break it, divide it up. And we’re free to share what we have when we know we have more than we need. That’s the tricky part because many have been seduced into thinking that they don’t have very much, that they don’t have enough. Time and again, Jesus makes the point that it’s highly destructive for the soul and our households when we live with a sense of scarcity, whether it’s money or food or time or talent, or even love—scarcity destroys individual lives, families, communities, churches, nations. [2]

Jesus wants his people to live from a sense of abundance, not scarcity. Trusting there’s enough and then sharing what we have, we discover there’s more than enough to go around. It allows everyone to get fed. This is why the Church has a rich history of being generous—and why the Church of Jesus Christ, I believe, should be one of the most generous institutions on the face of the earth. The church should be known to the world for its generosity. Because we know

what it’s like to receive God’s love in Jesus Christ, we are free to be generous. We give from our abundance, not our lack. When we know just how much we have, we’re then free to break it—not because we have to, but because we want to—and then to give it away, freely, sharing it with others so that blessing upon blessing and grace upon grace may fall upon our neighbors.

In his extraordinary book *God the Economist*, M. Douglas Meeks makes this central claim: “If the righteousness of God is present,” he writes, “there is always enough to go around.” [3] And righteousness stands at the heart of the gospel, especially for Matthew. Meeks says, the “economy of God...is the distribution of God’s righteousness.” It’s important to hear this and to get this point. Unfortunately, the word is often associated with the English word righteous, as in being morally right or virtuous. In the Bible, righteousness describes who God is, “the righteous one,” the One who does “steadfast love, justice, righteousness in the earth.” It’s an expression of God’s being, what God does. Righteousness can be understood as “God’s power for life.” [4]

If God’s righteousness—God’s power for life—is active in our lives, in the Church, in the kingdom, in our households and communities, then this power will bring people to life; it will secure one’s livelihood, that is, one’s ability to live. This means that when this “power for life” is present and real, the hungry get fed, and the homeless are given shelter and sanctuary; it means reconciliation and peace will be real. For how can human life flourish in times of alienation, exile, bombardments, terror, war, and poverty and all that impoverishes human life? When the power for life is not evident, when we stand in the way of God’s righteousness, when we hinder and obstruct God’s will for the world—often by doing nothing, often by minding our own business, often by not caring or not caring enough—then we know we are far from God’s kingdom. However, when this “power for life” is manifest within our hearts, relationships, families, communities, and churches, we’ll know it, and we’ll *feel* it because people will have an opportunity to live, thrive, and flourish. “There’s always enough to go around” because God desires that everyone is fed. Indeed, “the work of...the Holy Spirit...subverts any [economy] or *oikonomia* based on scarcity. The reason for this is that scarcity as a starting point will always produce an *oikos*, [a house] in which some are excluded from the means of life.” [5] That’s never God’s will.

Whenever we gather around the Lord’s Table, we affirm God’s abundance and power for life. Come eat. Be fed. Be filled. This is more than just a memorial meal, done “in remembrance of him,” simply remembering what happened long ago. It embodies God’s promise to be with us and provide for us in the breaking. It’s why John Calvin (1509-1564) insisted that the Lord’s Supper be included in every Sunday worship service. Calvin was overruled by the elders in Geneva because they felt having Communion every week would appear too “Catholic.” I think it’s important to state that appearing too “Catholic” is *not* a theological argument for abstaining from Communion.

Why is all this so important? Because when we approach the meal this way, as the real presence of the living Christ, the pattern of this meal informs and shapes our lives and ministry. The more we enact the blessing-breaking-giving of the bread, the more our lives enact blessing and breaking and giving. Our lives then become Christomorphic. That is, our lives take on the

form of Christ, and our lives become formed and reformed by the image of Christ—blessing, breaking, giving—working deep within our psyches. This, then, is what it means to be Christlike.

Let us bless the Lord for the abundance of our lives. Then let us break what we have; divide it, share it, give it away so that others, too, may know God’s abundant “power for life.” The meal shows us how it’s done.

## Sources

- [1] Jim Wallis, *Rediscovering Values: On Wall St., Main Street, and Your Street* (Howard Books, 2010), 120 “God’s economy, [God’s household] has two basic points: 1. There is enough; 2. If we share it.”
- [2] On living with a sense of abundance instead of scarcity, see Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 121ff.
- [3] M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 12.
- [4] Meeks, 94. “The *oikos* [house] of God is a gracious gift of God’s righteousness, God’s power for life. God’s gracious goodness gives enough, more than enough, for everyone in the household to live abundantly. The *question* of economics, will everyone in the household get what it takes to live? is referenced not to scarcity but to the righteousness of God which makes possible the sharing of the household’s store.
- [5] Meeks, 94.