

**The Feeding of the 5,000,000
August 3rd, 2008**

Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on August 3rd, 2008 at
Northminster Presbyterian Church.**

The 2008 Summer Olympic Games open in Beijing this week, which means that even as you're worshipping this Sunday, some 550,000 spectators from around the world are descending on the Chinese capital to take in the action at the venues. That's not counting the seven million tickets the Chinese government has released at low cost so that its own citizens can attend the games, or the more than 11,000 athletes who will be competing, or the 16,000 journalists who will be covering the events. That's a lot of people converging in one place, and that means that while the world will be watching the athletes, the organizers will be engaged in an even more challenging contest transporting, securing and feeding all those people.

How many? Let's just round it off at 5,000,000. Nice round number. And you think our last church potluck was chaotic!

Officials estimate that the Beijing Olympics will cost more than \$40 billion and a big chunk of that revolves around logistics and food. For the athletes, food selection and quality is set by the International Olympic Committee, which will follow the pattern of previous Games. Most of the food on the menu is Western with some Asian food mixed in.

For the spectators and others descending on the local economy, however, it seems to be a mixed bag. China has been very careful to cultivate a sense of regulation and safety around food issues, particularly in response to some rumors that surfaced about food preparation. A story circulated, for example, that vegetables were being fertilized with beer and soy milk, and another news item claimed that workers were actually chopping up cardboard and mixing it in with the pork in the popular "boazi rolls".

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Both news stories were proven false, but nevertheless the Chinese government and the Olympic Committee are very sensitive to charges that they won't be able to feed the crowds adequately and expeditiously. The government established the Olympic Food Safety Command Center to make sure that there are no problems.

It's a monumental task and you have to think that there's someone in an office somewhere in Beijing, the national capital of the People's Republic of China, today, praying — yes, praying — fervently that all of this works out. One bad food-poisoning story, like one athlete doping story, has the potential to ruin all the effort put into showcasing China as a country moving out of its agrarian roots into a modern nation.

Chinese officials know that when people gather together, whether it's five, 5,000, or 500,000, eventually those tummies start rumbling and you have to be ready to meet that need. It's always been that way, no matter the culture. Food is essential to both the physical and relational sides of the human experience.

Eating is a cultural experience

In first-century Jewish culture, eating a meal was really more of an event than simply gobbling down fast food. Meals were about hospitality, about sharing, about bonding. If you ate with someone, it meant that you were engaging in a deeper relationship. Jesus goes around eating with lots of people, from the religious elite to the outcasts of society — for Jesus, eating with people was a sign of things to come and was very much tied into his mission of proclaiming God's kingdom. Jesus was acting out the idea *that the kingdom is a worldwide reality where everyone is welcome and gets fed only the best*. It wasn't so much what Jesus ate, but who he ate it with that counted.

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The popularity of Jesus had grown to Olympic-sized proportions and people were following him everywhere around Galilee, listening, hoping, wanting to be healed. Jesus, however, had just heard about the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12) and was trying to get away by himself, possibly to reflect on his own mission in light of John's fate. The crowds were relentless, though, and like the paparazzi following star athletes and celebrities, they track him down.

Rather than make a run for it, Matthew tells us Jesus saw the heart of their need and "had compassion for them and cured their sick" (v. 14). But here's the logistical problem. Now it's late in the day, everyone's stomach is growling, and the nearest McDonald's is about 20 centuries away. In the disciples' minds, it was time to wrap it up and send the people away so that the team could finally relax. After all, their stomachs were probably growling, too. The crowd could scrounge up dinner in the nearby towns. It was a reasonable request. What was Jesus' response? "*You give them something to eat.*"

In the training manual for Ritz Carlton Hotel employees, there's a maxim that says, "If you see a problem, you own it." To say, "It's not my problem" or "It's not my job" is not acceptable. If you see a problem, you own it — you take responsibility. Jesus doesn't do the reasonable thing here, the rational thing, but turns the problem into an opportunity — a teachable moment. *You give them something to eat.*

The disciples immediately begin to think practically as they do the math and realize that they don't have the resources to do the job. Their own food supply is pretty meager, just five loaves and two fish, which basically amounted to "nothing" in the face of such a huge crowd (v. 17). They have crunched the numbers, added up the logistical formula, and it just doesn't jive. But Jesus seeks to teach them a different kind of math based not on addition, but on multiplication.

The disciples are thinking *scarcity*... Jesus is thinking *abundance*. Don't tell me what you **don't** have; show me what you **do** have. "Bring them here to me," says Jesus, who looks at a meal that's the equivalent of five dumplings and two spring rolls and sees a feast instead of a fiasco.

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Jesus had the people sit down on the grass, gave thanks to God and gave the food to his disciples. The connection to the Eucharist here is pretty obvious, but there's even more to it than that. Actually, the Greek verb here suggests that he "kept giving" it to his disciples as they distributed it. A small amount of bread multiplies into a feast that feeds the whole crowd, and there is even some left over — no scarcity, only abundance!

When a crowd gathers at our churches for worship, most of us are used to giving and getting a morsel of bread or one of those cardboard wafers during the Eucharist — something that's easily mass-produced and can feed a multitude on short notice. It's really not much of a meal and some think it should be that way. In fact, some traditions teach that excessive chewing of the communion bread is sacrilegious. So much for abundance!

But maybe we need to think abundance when it comes to the Eucharist. A pastor was used to giving out crumbs until one Sunday when a little girl about 3 years old came to the front of the sanctuary with her mom to receive Communion. The pastor knelt down beside her and said, "This bread means that Jesus loves you very much" and gave her a little piece of the loaf which she promptly wolfed down. Instead of moving down the line, she held out her hands in the way that she'd seen the people before her do, looked at the pastor with hopeful eyes and said, "More?"

More... With God there's always more — more grace, more love, more room, more of everything. God takes the smallest that we can offer and multiplies it into more than we can fathom. We need to be able to ditch the diet of scarcity and enjoy the bigger hunk of grace God offers us.

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We can look at the world around us, a world needing to be fed physically and spiritually, and immediately begin to worry about our assets. Jesus, however, is calling us to look beyond the logistical problems of addition and think multiplication.

The hungry multitudes — people hungry for their next meal, hungry for God, hungry for grace, hungry for a chance to change their lives — are always there, not just gathering for a quadrennial event. Jesus says to us, “*You* give them something to eat.” God promises to do the feeding; all we need to do is provide the resources.

Rather than scratching our heads and throwing up our hands in futility when faced with the enormity of need around us, Jesus invites us instead to take inventory. What *do* we have to offer? More than we think. If Jesus can feed 5,000 people with the equivalent of a po-po platter, then multiplying us and our resources to feed the whole world is no problem!