

Mark 6:30-44

“There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do. She gave them some broth without any bread, and whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.” This nursery rhyme, told by Mother Goose, made no sense to me when I was little. Why whip the children simply because the old woman is frustrated? It’s bad enough to send them to bed hungry. But it’s not their fault that there are so many of them.

I doubt that the author of this rhyme had Mark 6 open as he, or she, was writing it. But if so, our text for today would have reinforced what was written. They were not in a shoe; they were in a desolate place where there was plenty of green grass. But there were so many of them that the disciples became frustrated at Jesus’ words to them: “*You give them something to eat.*” Just like the old woman, they did not have the means to feed all these people. Their solution, therefore, was pretty much the same: It’s time to get out the whip and drive all these people away; the hour is late; tell them to go home and go to bed.

But Jesus would not hear of it. No...”*You,*” He told them, “*give them something to eat.*” How ridiculous this was in their eyes. He might as well have said: “You heal the leper there... You calm this storm... You make that lame man to walk... You raise this dead person to life... You feed all these people.” Take your pick of these. It doesn’t matter which one you choose. They are all impossible.

Do you feel their frustration? Can you empathize with them? I can, because this is how much of my life plays out. God puts me in frustrating situations; frustrating because I simply do not have the means to do what He says.

How about you? Pay this bill, pay that bill, get the air conditioner fixed, buy a new washing machine. “But God, I don’t have the means!” And so we get out the whip and we take out our frustration on those we love.

“*You give them something to eat.*” These words frustrate us in other ways; not just when we do not have the financial means, but also the emotional, the energy, the time. Life is so demanding. Some days we’re spinning plates trying to keep them from falling. But eventually we wear out. Our patience grows thin. And so we get out the whip and yell at our family. Sometimes we use the whip on ourself. We beat ourself up for not having what it takes to “*give them something to eat.*” Do we feel the frustration of the disciples in our text? Of course we do. We don’t just sympathize; we empathize.

Pastors are given the words of our text in another way. The words, “*You give them something to eat*” are applied to us specially in Jesus’ words to Peter: “*Feed My sheep.*” But how? With what? A pastor can turn into the old woman in a shoe when he sees these words as the heavy burden of the Law; as a command to which he simply cannot measure up. And out of frustration he gets out the whip of the Law and sends his precious sheep to bed without giving them the Bread of Life.

This story in Mark 6 takes on a whole new meaning both for the disciples, and for us, when we understand it not as a burden, but as words calling us to our proper vocation. Did Jesus expect

His disciples to go out and buy food for all these people? Absolutely not! “*You give them something to eat*” were not words demanding something of them which they did not have, but words which required of them that they be nothing more than vessels through which Jesus would feed His people. The disciples did not have the five loaves and two fish; someone in the crowd did. The disciples did not multiply the loaves and fish; Jesus did, and the disciples were given the food to carry to the people.

You and I are just like the disciples. We are called to be vessels in our vocations. “*You give them something to eat*” is not a demand from God which we, so often, are unable to fulfill. Through these words, Jesus is making vessels of us. He will take care of your bills. He will provide all your needs. He will feed your hungry family. He will multiply His gifts to you, and through you will “*give them something to eat.*”

This is not a call for us to be lazy; it’s a call to be faithful, and more, a call to trust Him even when we are tempted to get out the whip because life is so demanding and full of frustration. We don’t have what it takes to “*give them something to eat,*” but Jesus does. Are you a parent? Jesus has gifts for your children. Through you, He will give them. Are you a worker? Through you, Jesus will provide for your family. Are you a husband or wife, son or daughter? Jesus has love to give to your family members. Through you, He will give it. We are not the source of these blessings. Jesus is. We are the vessels. Through us, Jesus “*gives them something to eat.*”

This is something your pastor needs to relearn each and every day. I don’t have what it takes to “*give you something to eat.*” But Jesus does. I didn’t die and rise again for you. He did. I did not defeat the power of sin in your life. He did. I am not the source of your comfort, peace, and hope. Jesus is. It is not my vocation to be the source of your gifts. It is my vocation to be the vessel of these gifts.

And so the love I have for you is Jesus’ love. The peace I give to your hearts is the peace Jesus gives to you. The forgiveness of sins I proclaim and announce to you is not my forgiveness; it is Jesus’ forgiveness. He forgives you. He declares you to be His holy people. He gives you His body and blood in the Supper. Jesus does not get out the whip and send you to bed --even to your deathbed--without bread. He is the Bread of Life for your soul, and through me, as through a vessel, He “*gives you something to eat*”--the very food that sustains you for eternal life.

Jesus’ disciples eventually learned this lesson well. We see them acting as vessels in Mark 6 in carrying food to the people. We see them as vessels in the Book of Acts as they made the lame to walk and raised the dead to life. No more whips for the people....love, mercy, the power of God. They did not become frustrated at the needs of all the people. They now saw themselves as vessels through which Jesus was “*giving them something to eat.*”

That “something” is also for you. When was there a day in your life when there was nothing for you to eat? When was there a day in your life when you did not have a gracious God who forgives you? You are vessels of God’s gifts to others; but you are also recipients of His gifts. Not a day in your life will pass when Jesus will fail to “*give you something to eat,*” both for your body, and for your eternal soul. Amen.