

Some of you may remember the nursery rhyme that goes like this: “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, then whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.”

Who comes up with this stuff? Maybe it was someone who read our text for today. The story before us doesn’t take place in a shoe obviously. And the disciples are not old women. But they do resemble her in a way. They don’t know what to do when Jesus tells them, “*You give them something to eat.*”

I don’t know how many children the old woman had in the shoe with her, but the disciples have well over five thousand mouths to feed. What they want to do is to get out the whip and drive the people away; find their own food to eat, if they can; and then, I suppose, off to bed with them.

But Jesus will not hear of it. There may have been days in the past when the people went without food. But not on this day. There will be no whipping the people and sending them to their beds without bread. He who is the Bread of Life is here with them. He who has filled them with His teaching throughout the day will now fill them with food at the end of the day.

So, here’s a question. Since Jesus already knows what He is going to do, why does He tell His disciples, “*You give them something to eat*”?

He appears to be setting them up to fail. They are calculating in their minds how much money it will take to feed all these people. And so for them, frustration is about to set in. They know how to use a whip to send the people away. But they do not know how to give them the food they need.

But do you, and do I? Every week before I begin to work on my sermon, I pray these words of Psalm 127: “*Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*” “*Feed My sheep,*” is Jesus’ command, and not just to Simon Peter. And I reply: “With what? I have nothing to give Your sheep unless You provide it. Unless You, Lord, build the house, it will not be built. I give them something to eat? Who am I?”

And who are you? “*You give them something to eat.*” Are not these words also for you? Who is your responsibility? Who is under your care? Perhaps not five thousand. Yet do you have children or grandchildren to care for? Aging parents or grandparents? Whether one person is under your care, or five thousand, each one is precious to the Lord. And each one needs to be fed both in body and in soul. “*You give them something to eat.*”

And so, we join the disciples in doing math calculations. How much money will it take to provide for those under my care? How much time? How much of my energy? And we fall in the same way as the disciples fell. We look to ourselves, to what we have, to what we can do. And days come when our patience wears thin. How tempting it is to get out the whip and drive our loved ones, those under our care, as if they were cattle.

But this is not Jesus' way. While His disciples are doing math in their minds, Jesus is aching with compassion in His heart. He will build the house. He will feed His sheep. And He will use His disciples as His vessels.

They become waiters. Nothing more, but nothing less. Jesus prepares the meal. He gives the food to His disciples, and they give the food to the people. They are waiters, they are vessels. Jesus could feed the people without them. Yet He chooses to use them for this great task.

And in the same way, He uses you and me. When we think that we have what it takes to "give them something to eat," we place the focus on ourselves and not on Jesus. You and I have nothing. Nothing unless God provides it. And He does provide. For our daily needs, He provides. And for our greatest needs, He provides.

On the cross Jesus prepared the meal, for He was the Passover Lamb. He bled and died for all sinners. They used the whip on Him. Yet the whip was unnecessary, for He willingly went to the cross. He was not driven there by force. It was His love for you, His heart full of compassion, that drove Jesus to suffer and die for you.

It is this same love and compassion by which He uses us as His vessels. Vessels through which He feeds and blesses those under our care. There is no one here whom Jesus does not use as His vessel to provide for others. You are all vessels and waiters, as were His disciples. And there is no one here who is not cared for by someone else; someone who is Jesus' vessel to you. There is no gift, either of body or of soul, that is from you yourself. Everything that is a gift and blessing is given to you by Jesus through His vessels, or is given to others by Jesus through you.

There may have been days in the past when you and I went hungry, not so much with regard to physical food, but rather to spiritual. There may have been days when we pushed the food for our souls, the Bread of Life, away from us; when we refused to come to the Table to sit down on the green grass as did the five thousand. And so, we starved ourselves, not allowing Jesus to multiply His gifts to include us.

There may have been these days in the past. But not on this day. For today, He who is the Bread of Life is here with you. He who was broken on the cross, breaks the loaves on the altar before you, to multiply His gracious gifts to you. Jesus here gives Himself to you. And where Jesus is, there is forgiveness, there is life, and there is salvation.

Whatever day in the past you pushed Jesus away, that day is forgiven. You are forgiven. Each one of you Jesus forgives. His heart of compassion is more than enough to cover you and fill you with His blessings.

Jesus is not that old woman in the shoe. He uses no whip on you, only love and compassion. And in fact, if you feel like her at times, here is how you can see her differently: "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children, and loved them all too. She said, 'Thank You, Lord Jesus, for giving them bread.' Then kissed them all gladly, and sent them to bed." In this way, Jesus' love and compassion is multiplied through you to those under your care. Amen.