

MULTIPLICATION TABLE

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Perhaps my most favorite story in all the Bible is the story that we find only in the Gospel of John. It's a story right at the end of the Gospel that takes place after Jesus has been raised from the dead. Some of the disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee fishing. They are doing some night fishing. They are dragging their nets through the water with the hopes of coming upon a school of fish. It's the life they've always known – this fishing – but this night they are not having much luck. They are catching nothing. The schools are, shall we say, schooling them. And just as the sun is about to rise, just like the sun was about to rise when Mary came to the tomb a few days before, they look at the shore and they see a figure of a man. And again much like Mary – they are having a hard time recognizing who the resurrected Jesus is. So Jesus calls to them from the shore and suggests that they cast their nets to the other side of the boat. So they do and the result is they pull in a catch like they have never caught before. More fish than they can handle. Now it is this catch they've made that help them to see that the mysterious figure on the shore is the risen Jesus. So they make their way to shore and there Jesus is and he has a fire going. And on the fire he is cooking some loaves and fish for breakfast. Now us 21st century Americans look at a breakfast of loaves and fish and what we want to say is that Jesus isn't much of a cook. When was the last time you had bread and fish for breakfast? But for the disciples when they see loaves and fish – what they see is not breakfast, but dinner. And the dinner they see is the dinner that Jesus served to five thousand people. He served dinner to 5000 people – as we read a few minutes ago – with five loaves and two fish. Now not only do they see a dinner of loaves and fish – these disciples – they also see, because this is the Gospel of John – they also see and remember where that dinner came from. They remember, perhaps painfully, that when they saw the crowd of 5000 people they assumed that none of them had what was necessary to feed the crowd. Send them away, they said to Jesus, we don't have what it takes.

But somewhere out of the crowd a young boy came forward and he came forward with his own dinner. He had brought with him something that maybe his mother had packed for him. Dinner that had been given him. He brought his own little meal of five little barley loaves and two fish. And he said to Andrew – here let's start with these. Is this what it takes? And Andrew brought before Jesus this child who was willing to part with the entirety of his food and said, "Here's a young man who is ready to give what he's been given." And Jesus said, "That's all I need." And to the astonishment of the disciples – Jesus takes the sacrifice of the young man and he give thanks for it. He says to God thank you for what you've given, please use it to feed these hungry people. And with this gift of gratitude and sacrifice Jesus feeds the crowd before him. Now that's a moment a little boy never forgets. It's a moment no one forgot.

So that's what those disciples see when they walk on shore with their catch of fish and look at Jesus' breakfast of loaves and fish. And if by chance they've missed the point – Jesus says to them – bring some of the fish that you've caught, you've got a net full, and put it on the fire too. Give me what you've got so all can be fed. Now it doesn't take much, I imagine, for the disciples to connect the dots – that Jesus was the one responsible for the fish – and now he is inviting them to experience the joy of giving your dinner away.

Now again, because this is John's Gospel, we know that these disciples have already received the Holy Spirit. Back a chapter ago, Jesus when he has them gathered, breathes upon them the Holy Spirit. Which means they have been given power to be the Church. It's what the Holy Spirit does – communes the Church – gathers the Church – brings about the communion of the saints. So it is the Church we see in those disciples making their way to shore – it is the Church that Jesus invites to dine – and it is the Church that Jesus invites to experience the joy of giving what you've been given. The joy of giving what you've been given. It is the Church that Jesus invites to offer what we have so that

the 5000 or the 10,000 or the 100,000 can be fed. This is what Church looks like. Gathered by the Holy Spirit at the table where we discover the joy of giving to Jesus what we have so that it can be multiplied to feed the crowd.

You see it wasn't that long ago when the disciples looked out on the crowd and said – too much. Too many. And when they looked at themselves and said – too little. Too late. It wasn't long ago when the disciples were worried about what they didn't have, when they worried about how much they needed to hold onto. But now Jesus had been raised and the breath of the Holy Spirit was upon them – and there was that joy and smile of that little boy implanted in their brains – and now they could see that the only thing Jesus invites us to as the Church is to the joy. The joy of giving what you have been given. The joy of giving what you have been given in order to watch Jesus give thanks for it and multiply it to feed whatever crowd that stands before you.

I will never forget the time in a previous church I served where we ran up against one of those potential giving gaps like the one this church is looking at. It was a bigger gap really – one that required a congregational meeting to talk about. And we talked about all that was at risk and all the opportunities of ministry that might pass us by. And we prayed out of the hopes that some might be moved to do something. And when the meeting was over and I was collecting my stuff to leave, a young woman came up to me and just stood there. I knew her. She was a single mother with an eight year old kid in our Sunday School. And she was standing there and she had this big grin on her face. And I asked her what she was grinning about. And she didn't say anything. She just stood there grinning. And then she handed me a slip of paper. And I took the slip of paper and could see it was a check. I did not open it. I said, What is this? And she said, with a grin ear to ear – "You more than anyone knows what this church has done for us. This is our family. I've been secretly saving up some money to take my girl to Disney. But you know, God has been so good to me. Disney can wait

another year.” Now to be honest, I don’t remember what the check said. But I do remember what her face said. The grin. The smile ear to ear. She had felt the joyful breath of the Holy Spirit.

“Bring some of the fish you caught,” Jesus says. Not because he NEEDS it. Jesus doesn’t ask us to give because HE needs it, but because we need it. It’s where the joy is. It’s not what he wants from us, it’s what he wants for us. This is what Church is. The joyful communion of givers who get to witness Jesus’ multiplication! What could be better than that? Would that they had had an iPhone – just to get a quick picture of that boy ... watching all those hungry people being fed from the gift of what he had to give. It’s what Church looks like.

We come by it honestly, don’t we? For here is the table of multiplication. Just some bread and wine. What is this among so many?

So maybe we call the year 2014 here at Church of the Palms the year of the loaves and the fishes. 5000 Fed. The 5000 Fed. The year we look into our own nets and see there nothing but what Jesus has given us. The year we heard him say, “Bring the fish you caught.” And we’ll say, “It wasn’t us. It was you.” And then to see what happens with our faces once we give it – and see what he does with it.