

## Ephesians 3:14-21 Love Surpassing

The gospel reading for today comes from the Gospel of John and is the account of the Feeding of the Multitude followed by the scene on the lake in which Jesus walks on the water. I was, however, fascinated by the short text from 2 Kings which is the Old Testament reading because I had never noticed it before. One might call it the Feeding of the 100.

Though it does not compare in terms of degree to the New Testament accounts about Jesus and the 5,000, it remains interesting because it speaks of the same idea; a person came offering a small gift that when blessed by God and given to the people, it had a quite large affect. "The people will eat and have leftovers," Elisha said. And they did.

There is a relationship between physical and spiritual nourishment that is drawn out in the Bible. Food is a metaphor for the spiritual life, which must also be nourished. The biblical idea is that there is more than enough to go around.

### Limited Good

Perhaps an idea from the realm of Cultural Anthropology might be helpful. In 1965, an anthropologist name George Foster published an article entitled, "Peasant Societies and the Image of Limited Good."

It sounds intimidating but simply means that in certain cultures there is a prevailing idea that there is only so much to go around. There is only a finite amount of food, water, money, even power and love etc.

Since that phrase, Limited Good, is probably unfamiliar I will change the name of it. Think of a bowl of cheesy potatoes. This phrase refers to the perception of an almost empty bowl of potatoes.

In these societies there is a profound resistance to the concept of bettering oneself, having more. The basis of this resistance is that if there is only a finite amount of, let's say potatoes, then if one person takes more, somebody must get less. The pursuit of a better quality of life is a theft because it necessarily means taking from someone else.

The opposite of this perception is the perception of unlimited good, like a bowl that miraculously is always filled, and leads to the opposite inference, that one can take more without harming anyone else, because there is an unlimited supply.

Actually, the supply of "good" *is* finite, and we are aware of it now. The planet earth is small in some ways, and if there is enough to go around, measures must be taken to ensure some sense of equity, at least the possibility of everyone having something to eat, and this has implications for social ministry.

Surely one has been inspired at some point in life not to throw away food, or take more than one can eat, with the exhortation, “there are hungry people who could use what we discard,” or some variation.

### Spiritual Food

Very often in the Bible we find the concept of food applied to spiritual things, and that is the emphasis this morning. Peter speaks of it in 1 Peter 2 where he encourages believers to seek pure spiritual milk that by it they might grow up to salvation. Paul refers to the same idea in 1 Corinthians 3. He says he gave them milk to drink because they were not yet ready for solid food.

The author of Hebrews offers the same critique when he writes, “. . . You need milk, not solid food.”

The metaphor is challenging for all of us. But it is in line with the Lord’s Supper idea of consuming the body of Christ, taking it in and being nourished by it, the result being a mature faith, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, to help and lead others, and to handle hardships without being destroyed by them.

### Paul’s Faith

The story of Paul is well-known. He was Jewish and from what is now central Turkey. He had both Roman citizenship and a solid Jewish education under the

great pharisee Gamaliel. At one point in his career he was an inquisitor of sorts, working on behalf of the leadership in Jerusalem to root out the early believers in Christ in the conviction that the new faith was a threat.

On his way to Damascus to make some arrests (this must have been 3 or 4 years after the crucifixion), he had a conversion experience in which he was blinded by a great light and he heard a voice from heaven.

In a radical shift he became one of the leading voices of the faith he previously had tried to silence. This change not only led him to his greatest achievements, and his greatest sense of fulfillment, but also his greatest hardships and trials. As a matter of fact, the Letter to the Ephesians is known as one of the “prison” epistles because he was in jail when he wrote it.

There are times when Paul’s writing shifts from whatever the immediate situation he was addressing to speak in glowing generalities about his understanding of God, of heaven, of faith, of sin; to give great benedictions the heights of which have never been surpassed in all these years. Our text today is one of those benedictions.

Though he doesn’t speak specifically either about the Feeding of the 5,000 or the 100 from 2 Kings, his message has much in common with them in such a way that they can be put together without any sense of

awkwardness. What he says is that when it comes to the things of God, there is more than enough to go around. We are meant to perceive God's love in terms of the image of unlimited good, the bowl full of potatoes.

"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God."

### Implications

I am sure that neither Paul nor his readers knew about the 1965 article that introduced the perception of Limited Good to the world (or for that matter the concept of cheesy potatoes), and the insinuation that the people in Galilee or Corinth or anywhere else fit the description of people who subscribe to it.

But I do see in the lessons of the miraculous feedings and in the powerful deeds of Jesus a message that is for all believers in every time and place. That message is that God's love is always enough to meet any demand that it faces.

It never runs out. "It never fails," as Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 13, "it always protects, it always trusts, always hopes, it always perseveres." It overcomes all

human weakness, ignorance, moral and ethical failings, greed and excess. While it is certainly true that the physical resources of the earth are limited, God's grace is not. There is plenty. There are leftovers.

### Beware

But beware, once it has gotten under the skin how wide and long and high and deep God's love surpassing knowledge is, and surpassing pain and selfishness, anger, and fear; it will change your mind, change your heart, change your life.

Make no mistake, the life of this world will be less appealing to you, and the people of this world more compelling. Ambition and desire will fade, generosity and compassion will increase.

"Wake up, O sleeper  
rise from the dead  
And Christ will shine on you"

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate toward one another, forgiving each other, as in Christ, God has forgiven you."

And to this grace, there is no end.

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