

[Play Abbott and Costello video]

If you think Lou Costello is creative with his math, wait until we take a look at Jesus Math. Like Costello, Jesus presents a math problem that just doesn't add up. We'll return to James next week with a stunning conclusion to our Jim Time series, which includes a healing service.

But today we're going to spend some time with Matthew, also known as Levi. We meet Matthew early on in the gospels. When we meet Matthew, we find him in a most despised of careers for a Jewish man. Matthew is a tax collector. Matthew is a numbers guy. In fact, you'll find that of all the gospel writers, Matthew is the one that is most fascinated with numbers and the relationship of his numbers to the authenticity of Jesus.

Being a numbers guy, it's surprising to hear Matthew tell a story where the math that just doesn't add up. Jesus delivers fuzzy math in our story of the feeding of the 5000. You see with Jesus Math, 5 plus 2 equals 5000 (psst. More like 15-20K!)

But first let me share a significant fact found across all of the gospels. Jesus liked to eat. It was so very obvious. How obvious was it?

So obvious that the disciples of John the Baptist dared to ask Jesus why He didn't fast. So obvious that Jesus' enemies asked his disciples why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. So obvious that Jesus' enemies even called him a glutton and a drunk.

Think about all of his parables that included things like wheat, fruit trees, banquets, and vineyards.

One scholar jokingly said, "If [Jesus] had not traveled by foot so far and so often, it is quite possible that He would have been much chunkier than the Jesus that appears in our stained-glass windows."

But think about it, don't the best conversations happen over meals? That was certainly the case on our recent trip to Iowa. We share both happy and sad news. We uncover creative ideas. Relationships are formed and strengthened. We laugh and have fun together. Plus, isn't it hard to concentrate when your tummy is rumbling?

Perhaps this is one reason why Jesus told his disciples: "You give them something to eat." But when Jesus talks about "them", he's not talking about a small, intimate gathering around your dining room table. Jesus is referring to a crowd of thousands of people.

What Jesus is asking of the disciples is impossible! For us it would be like being invited to the Super Bowl, discovering that all the concession workers went on strike and you're the one being asked to feed the crowd.

If I were one of Jesus' disciples, I know how I'd react. My heart would pound, my palms would sweat, my face? Beet red. I'd want to crawl under a rock. Who could manage such an expectation?

Our story in Matthew, the feeding of the 5,000 is one of the very few stories about Jesus recorded in all four Gospels. That means...it's a really big deal. A story talked about for a long time. A story that made a lasting impression. A story that people never forgot.

Why is it such a big deal? Because aside from the gravity of the miracle itself, it makes a statement about how God can do a lot with a little. It also tells us something about how Jesus feels about his followers feeding the hungry. This is a Jesus that says that if someone comes to your door in need, don't tell them to go somewhere else to be fed.

Now by this time Jesus is really starting to get popular. And our event from today will only make his life crazier.

Think of it as you would think about those bands that finally hit it big—seemingly out of nowhere—because they have a song or album that goes off the charts.

Now let's think about the disciples. All of them living their entire lives in complete obscurity only to find themselves living with Jesus who has become a regional sensation overnight.

Everyone wanted a piece of Jesus. Everyone wanted to be with him. Everyone wanted something from him. How exhausting for Jesus and his disciples.

This chapter began with the beheading of John the Baptist. This was Jesus' cousin. Can you hear Jesus replaying those words John spoken over him at his baptism. "You must increase and I must decrease. (Repeat) When John said decrease, Jesus didn't think he meant decrease. He needed to process what happened when Herod beheaded John. So, he took his disciples and they went to a solitary place. A place in the middle of nowhere.

But this is Jesus. He's the hottest ticket in Galilee and guess what? "The crowds followed him on foot from their towns." Jesus and the disciples just couldn't escape.

But Jesus didn't get frustrated. He didn't get mad. Instead, according to vs 14, "He had compassion for them and cured their sick."

Jesus forgot all about His exhaustion, his empty stomach and His own sorrow the minute He saw people in need.

For Jesus, compassion surpasses everything. For Jesus selflessness is always first and foremost. Jesus shows time and time again that when you are full of the love of God for others, the self just falls away.

And isn't that exactly how we should be church family? (Wait for response, repeat if necessary)

Did you know that we worry less about ourselves when we are busy helping others. Science tells us that thinking about others reduces depression and anxiety in our own lives.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus was teaching a multitude of desperate folks—even though He himself was tired and hungry.

And then, it started to get late. His disciples were hungry, they were tired, and maybe just a bit cranky.

So, they approach Jesus and say, “Hey Teacher, um, you know, um, This is a remote place, and it’s getting late. So um how about we send the crowds away to the villages, um so they buy some food for themselves.” (Big goofy grin)

This was logical. They were so smart! This had to make perfect sense to Jesus too.

But to Jesus, THIS WAS MADNESS. “Send them away???...Send them away????”

This is not kingdom thinking! This isn’t what we’re about! This does not show compassion and selflessness. This is complete selfishness. This is inwardly focused.”

Jesus has an answer to the suggestion of sending the people away. “You give them something to eat.” (Look in despair)

Gasp, Cry, Cough, Grunt. Imagine the shock, the disbelief, the exhausted anger of the disciples?

They scrounge up five measly loaves and two scrawny fish. They march back to Jesus with smug confidence. Ha...what’s he going to do now. Now he’s going to see it. See that we were right. Start sending the people way. Ha!

This is the moment Jesus had been waiting for, the moment to show them what Jesus math looks like. Where they saw limitations, Jesus saw enough.

Not much has changed in the last 2000 years. It's so much easier to focus on our limitations. So much easier to point out how unequipped we are. How little we have. Preferring to drown in a sea of fear and insufficiency instead of leaning on Jesus.

Besides, who wants to deal with the mess of humanity and hunger. It's an overwhelming problem. No, wait. It's insurmountable. No area of need has what is required.

These are the thoughts of someone who is forgetting what we mean when we say Jesus math. We forget the times God made a way where it seemed impossible: the Red Sea, manna and quail in the wilderness, Jesus stilling the storm.

When I look back, I know that I can pinpoint many instances of God working in my life in a way I never thought possible. When do you remember God showing up for you?

You see, every day can be a miracle day when we are willing to share what we have been given, trusting that it's enough.

I have a sign in my office that says, Where God Guides God Provides. I can tell you that sometimes that is easier for me to believe than others. But time and time again I've seen God do just that. (Personal situation)

So, church family, can we live by faith and not use our "lack of [fill in the blank]" as an excuse to avoid doing what God is calling us to do for people in need?

Just about every day of the week people come to St. John's UMC experiencing hunger. And we are very blessed to have our food pantry and a dedicated team operating it. Open from 9-12 on Fridays. We also give out daily bags to those who need food in between. Our daily bags are

packed with items that don't need to be cooked. We make sure we have options in the pantry for those who don't have a stove or oven or even a microwave.

So yes, we do a lot not to send them away and we do a lot to give them something to eat. Over the past few weeks, we've been asking for food for the pantry because our shelves were literally bare. And thank you to those of you who were able to help out.

We've received things like soups, canned pasta, peanut butter, granola bars, canned tuna and chicken, fruit cups, bottled water. We're grateful for the many items you gave us that don't need to be heated to eat.

Let us continue be the church that accepts what Jesus told his disciples, "You give them something to eat."

Let's never be the disciples asking to "send them away," or to "come back later."

Let us be the church that says as emphatically as possible, "We will not send people away hungry."

Faith tells us that the antidote to fear and insufficiency is found in taking the meager bits of what we have and inviting Jesus to bless them and use them for the sake of a broken world.