

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Steve Matthies**  
**February 22, 2009**

**Not Enough**  
**Mark 6:30-44**

Less than a month after the president of Whitworth College handed me my diploma, I was learning the ropes at a soup kitchen on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It was the late 1980s and homelessness in New York City was epidemic. I'd come as a short-term missionary to coordinate the three groups who started the ministry—students from Union Seminary and Columbia University and members of Broadway Presbyterian Church where the soup kitchen was housed.

One of my jobs was to order food and supplies, making sure we could feed the hundreds of people who came each week. Students couldn't put much in our coffers, and the church wasn't wealthy. So I placed my orders cautiously. I would always call our treasurer, Janet, a graduate student at the university, and tell her, "Janet, I need to put in an order today." Then I'd tell her the amount and ask, "Do we have sufficient funds to cover it?" And more than once that year she said, "No, but go ahead and place the order. The money will be there when the bill arrives."

I don't think I fully appreciated it at the time, but Janet's confidence that our Lord would provide as we stepped out in faith was an important lesson to me. It's a message that Scripture seems especially concerned to drive home. In fact, the only miracle of Jesus found in all four New Testament Gospels zeroes in on this very topic. Here's how the evangelist Mark tells it:

**The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.<sup>1</sup>**

This little story captures the flavor of the whole biblical drama. People are busy doing things, active with the normal routines of life: loving and playing, working and talking, buying and selling, coming and going. Yet they're searching, too, hoping and hurting and wondering. They need help, and they seem in a way to know it. They're starving, really—longing for meaning and direction, yearning for relationship, desiring food and drink and shelter. It's the same world we know from walking around in it, from living in it day in and day out: people with hungry hearts, hungry souls, hungry stomachs trying to make it and maybe even make it better somehow.

And there in the middle of it all is Jesus who has come to be with them. They crowd around him. They check him out. They listen. And when he slips away they seek him out and wait for him to show up. When he does, his heart goes out to them because he can tell they're so needy. He fills them in on the important things in life, teaching them the rhythms of grace.

And then those closest to Jesus notice the makings of a crisis. Perhaps they sensed already what Trotsky would later suggest, that “any society is only three square meals away from a revolution.” Whatever their motive, they warn Jesus—order him, really—“It's getting late out here. Send the crowds away so they can get dinner in the nearest town!”

Everything so far at least makes sense. We can follow the story. Jesus' close associates might seem a bit pushy, rude even, but they've got their heads screwed on straight.

“You give them something to eat,” Jesus counters.

*What?* Maybe he just doesn't realize how serious things are getting. Or maybe he's so into his teaching that he's not thinking about what they're saying.

“You're kidding, right? Five *thousand* men. Where are we going to get a whole year's income to pay for it?” They can't believe it. Apparently he just doesn't get it.

“What have you got with you?” he asks.

“Five loaves. A couple of fish,” they tell him. Are they shaking their heads in disbelief at this point, or do they think he'll finally wake up and smell the coffee once he sees they've got almost nothing on them?

Everyone knows people can give from their *excess*. But honestly, this is over the top. Philip, according to John's Gospel, tries to talk sense into Jesus. “Six month's wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little,” he points out. *There's just not enough to meet the need.*

Let's pause here for a moment, because don't we all feel that way sometimes? That there's not enough? Someone once asked Andrew Carnegie, a man who had amassed an immense fortune in steel, “How much is enough?” Carnegie replied, “Just a little more.”

So if I can put it this way, let me ask you: What's your “not enough”? Is it not enough time, not enough friends, not enough fun, not enough money, not enough faith? Do you feel like you're

not smart enough, or old enough, or young enough, or wealthy enough, or organized enough, or funny enough, or educated enough, or popular enough, or strong enough, or cool enough, or fast enough, or talented enough, or patient enough? Do you ever have this nagging sense that you're just not good enough, that you're not righteous enough, or that you're not faithful enough? "God certainly couldn't use me," you say to yourself, "because I'm not worthy enough, my life's simply not together enough."

I think sometimes the only thing that keeps me in the game is recalling who God has blessed and worked with up until now. There's Abraham and Sarah, hardly young and fertile enough to produce a great nation, and at times hardly trusting enough either. There's Moses, who's not eloquent or persuasive enough. There's David, not always selfless or morally upstanding enough. There's the prophet Jeremiah, not exactly willing or enthusiastic enough. Or the prophet Hosea, whose family is not together enough. And then there are Jesus' own disciples, who aren't humble enough, trusting enough, alert enough, sensitive enough to the children around them, or prayerful enough. And that's just scratching the surface of the ways they fall short.

But one of my favorite people in a list like this is Gideon, I suppose because I can see so much of myself in him.

Gideon was one of the so-called "judges" in Israel. The Old Testament book of Judges describes this trying time in Israel's life. It shows Israel at the wild borderland between their desert wanderings and their settled life in a new land. Because of that, Judges has been called a 'liminal' book, and it's worth pondering that word for a moment.

Liminal comes from a word meaning 'threshold'. It calls to mind an in-between or transitional time or place. We can get our minds around this word liminal if we picture a beach. A beach forms the border between the sea, which is one constant, and the land, which is another. But the beach itself is forever changing, shifting, receding and returning—an in-between space that's neither completely ocean nor fully land.

Beaches are great places to visit, but horrible places to stay. You don't want to build your house on a beach. In fact Jesus used that reality to cap off his great Sermon on the Mount. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn't act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rains fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"<sup>2</sup>

The period of judges—Gideon's day—was a liminal time precisely because it was so transitory and unstable, like sand under a building. Moses and his successor Joshua, the two great wilderness generation leaders, had died and Israel had entered the land of Canaan. But they didn't yet have another ruler, certainly not yet a king, to replace them. And so they were constantly beset by outside invaders and by inner temptations to follow the customs and the gods of the people around them. So again and again God "would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them,"<sup>3</sup> as the narrator tell us.

Well one day God's messenger visits Gideon while he's threshing wheat not on the threshing floor, but at the winepress, so the foreign armies won't spot him and steal his wheat or kill him.<sup>4</sup>

The messenger greets Gideon: “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior... Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian.”

Now here’s where I start tracking with Gideon. “But sir, how can I deliver Israel?” he responds. “My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” Gideon hears what the angel calls him, but he also knows how he feels inside, and he knows how the real world works. “I don’t have what it takes,” he says, hesitating and doubting.

But of course God doesn’t give up so easily, and after some negotiating, and with the promise that God will be with him, Gideon gives in and decides to start in on God’s plan.

Then, a few scenes later, comes the really good part. Gideon and thirty-two thousand Israelite troops are camped by a spring in the Jezreel Valley. “You’ve got too many troops,” God tells him. “You’ll think you won by your own power. Send home everyone who’s shaking in their boots.” So twenty-two thousand head home, leaving ten thousand to fight.

“That’s still too many,” God says. “Here’s what we’ll do. Watch the troops as they get a drink down at the water. All those who lap like dogs put over to one side, and all those who kneel and cup their hands, put on the other side.”

So Gideon sorts them out. Only three hundred lap like dogs, putting their head down to the water like sitting ducks that the enemy could pick off at will. The rest had the good sense to kneel and use their hands, alert to what was going on around them.

“Then the Lord said to Gideon, ‘With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes.’”

If I’m Gideon at this point, I’m thinking, “No way is this enough men, and it’s certainly not the right guys to take into battle. These guys are fools. We don’t stand a chance.”

But that, of course, is exactly God’s point. “You’re right, it’s not enough,” he’s telling Gideon. “You need me, too, or you’re sunk.”

It’s the same back on the edge of Lake Galilee. Five loaves and two fish, nowhere near enough. “The disciples think they have ‘nothing here’ except these seven items,” Dale Bruner observes. “But they are counting only the realities that impress them, not the Reality that should impress them most. Disciples should always count to eight.”<sup>5</sup>

Like Gideon, the disciples are caught in a liminal moment. They’re out in a deserted place at dusk. It’s unstable and risky out there. They’ve just heard that King Herod murdered their friend John the Baptist and the large, hungry, and maybe even volatile crowds around them are, as Jesus put it, leaderless, “like sheep without a shepherd.” No mere pastoral image, “shepherd” was mainly a word for a military leader. In fact, in John’s version of the story, the people want to grab Jesus and force him to be their king, which is to say they want him to lead them in battle against Herod and the Romans.<sup>6</sup>

Both Gideon and the disciples know full well they haven't got enough to do what God is calling them to do—just a small group of guys who flunked out of boot camp and a meager bit of bread and fish. But what our Lord instructs his disciples according to Matthew's version of the story is simply this: "Bring them here to me."

"The church learns from this story," Bruner suggests, that "'bring them here to me' means to give Jesus everything we have, in practical obedience, however insignificant that everything may seem to be... [because] [t]he supernatural Lord uses natural means to help the world."<sup>7</sup>

I think one of the reasons God puts stories like this in front of us is so that we'll ask ourselves, "Could God be calling me to bring my "not enough" to him, to serve his purposes in some assignment he is giving me? Could he be calling us as his church to bring our "not enough" so he can meet some staggeringly large need in the world today?"

About forty years ago, the Catholic Church published a series of documents out of its Vatican II conference. One of them underscores what we see in the story of Jesus and his disciples in this provocative way: "The right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church held this view, teaching that [people] are obliged to come to the relief of the poor, and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods... Since there are so many people in this world afflicted with hunger, this sacred Council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the saying of the Fathers: 'Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him you have killed him.' According to their ability, let all individuals use these goods especially to provide individuals and nations with the means for helping and developing themselves."<sup>8</sup>

Just last August, less than six months ago, twenty one evangelical leaders from churches across the global South sent a letter to us in the West, addressing this same issue. I will read the letter in full because of the urgency of its appeal:

#### TO THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

As the Church of the Lord in what is known as the "Southern" part of the world, moved by the Holy Spirit to fight for the abundant life that Jesus Christ offers, we address our Christian family in the United States, a Church of the same covenant, faith and love. Grace and Peace to all of our brothers and sisters.

We know your works of love; these works have allowed millions of human beings for many generations in our countries in the South to receive the gospel, the Grace of Jesus Christ and the power of His Salvation. The U.S. church's untiring missionary effort planted in our lands Hope in Him who came to reconcile EVERYTHING.

Nevertheless, the political, social and economic situation in the places where this hope has been announced is increasingly distressing. Millions of people in the global South are dying of hunger, violence and injustice. These situations of poverty and pain are not simply the product of the internal functions of our countries; rather they are the results of the international policies of the governments that wield global power.

Therefore, we have this against you, brothers and sisters, that along with this powerful announcing of the Gospel, the Church from the United States has not also raised its voice in protest against the injustices that powerful governments and institutions are inflicting on the global South—injustices that afflict the lives and ecosystems of millions of people who, centuries after the proclamation of the Gospel, still have not seen the sweat of their brow turned into bread.

The worsening inequality and poverty in the South is alarming. Seven years since the United States and 191 other nations publicly promised to cut extreme global poverty in half by the year 2015 through the eight Millennium Development Goals..., your country has made only a little progress towards fulfilling its commitments.

[These goals] should stir us to action because they echo the calls of the biblical prophets for justice and equity. Further, they are achievable and measurable markers on the roadmap to end extreme global poverty.

And so we ask you as sisters and brothers, citizens of the wealthiest most powerful nation on earth, to publicly challenge your candidates and political leaders—now and after the elections are over—to lead the world in the struggle to cut global poverty in half by 2015. If you who know the Truth will not speak for us who will?

The Church in the United States has the opportunity today to be faithful to the Hope that it preaches. We urge you to remember that the Hope to which you were called as a messenger demands that you seek first the Kingdom of God and God's justice.

Out of love for us, the global Church, in holiness, use your citizenship responsibly for the benefit of the entire world; it is for this very reason that the Lord poured out His life on the Cross.

All who have ears, let them hear what the Lord says to His Church.<sup>9</sup>

*Christianity Today* magazine, in an article about this letter, quotes an evangelical pastor of a megachurch in Florida who is on the board of the World Evangelical Alliance: “Those of us in evangelical churches,” he says, “are kind of late to the table on some of these issues because we've been focusing on more personal morality—and we've forgotten to address the issues of public morality... Even though there are a great number of people who are facing financial instability, this is just the right time to find out what your priorities really are and whether or not you're going to love your neighbor as you love yourself.”<sup>10</sup>

It's hard not to wince when hearing comments like these, or even to be outraged. “How dare they lay a guilt trip on us as though we're to blame!” we may think. But I also think deep down the reaction many of us have to appeals like this is to say to ourselves, “I'd love to help, but we're just getting by as it is. Unfortunately there's just not enough money or time or energy to do what they're asking us to do.”

As Bruner notes, “We often feel that we have an insufficient ‘five and two’ with which to address our... ‘five thousand’. We are easily discouraged by ‘realities’ that tell us we cannot cope. But the Christian faith is nothing if it is not a supernaturalism, if it can count only to seven, if it does not believe that Jesus is risen and can do things.”<sup>11</sup>

So let me ask again: Is God calling you to meet some particular need? Is he calling us as a church to some over-the-top-looking assignment, like the one addressed to us in that letter or maybe something else entirely? If he is, our “not enough” is no roadblock. He calls us to bring it to him.

And even if you aren’t aware of some particular task God is calling you to carry out, we are all, as followers of Jesus, called to do God’s will daily—to be kind, to bless, to love enemies, to forgive, and a host of other acts that flow out of the grace and truth of Jesus. But honestly, who of us is really up to the task? Which of us has “enough” to pull off even this daily faithfulness?

The deep reality is that *none of us is, or has, enough, ever, on our own*. What’s obvious looking at Gideon and the disciples in their impossible situations is really true of us every single moment, if we only knew it: *we need Jesus*. That is not a deficit or a problem that we need to overcome either. It is a created reality. We were made as contingent beings who cannot survive much less thrive on our own. The main and pervasive lie in the modern world is that we are self made, self directed beings. But the main scriptural corrective to this lie and therefore the truth about ourselves is that we are utterly dependent upon our Maker and Savior.

“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,” Jesus said, “because apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>12</sup> And the apostle Paul confirmed it, saying, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”<sup>13</sup> We need the Lord. And when we come face to face with our “not enough” we are given an important reminder of that essential fact, and a call to give it to him.

The remarkable and humanly baffling thing is that Gideon and his band of misfits routed a Midianite army too vast to count, and that the disciples handed out bread and fish to more than five thousand people with plenty left over, and that just the exact right amount showed up in a soup kitchen account each time the bills came due. You may even have your own stories of when your “not enough” was used by God in an extraordinary way to fulfill his purposes in utterly surprising ways that left tears in your eyes and your heart throbbing with thanks.

I think we are meant to bring all of our “not enoughs” to Jesus every day, just as he depended on his Father daily and lived with a constant awareness of his presence and powerful help. Jesus loves to help hurting people, people who are in need. His heart goes out to them and he wants to use whatever “not enough” we bring to bless us and others as well.

Jim Edwards sums up our remarkable story from Mark’s Gospel this way. “God wills to fill his creatures with himself, to meet their needs with his surplus, to expand their smallness by his greatness, and to transform mundane life into abundant life (John 10:10). The turning point in the story is traceable to the moment when Jesus looks on the crowd with *compassion*, desiring to fill it with the abundance of grace within himself. ‘From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another’ (John 1:16).”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 6:30-44.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:26-27.

<sup>3</sup> Judges 2:18. See Judges 2:1-23 for a description of this whole time period.

<sup>4</sup> See Judges 6:11-7:7 for the following story.

<sup>5</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 68.

<sup>6</sup> See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 191-5 for a fuller development of this idea.

<sup>7</sup> Bruner, *Matthew*, 68-9.

<sup>8</sup> From the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, W. M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (1966), quoted in Bruner, *Matthew*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.micahchallenge.us/letter\\_to\\_the\\_church.shtml](http://www.micahchallenge.us/letter_to_the_church.shtml) (accessed 2/21/2009).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/septemberweb-only/139-23.0.html> (accessed 2/21/2009).

<sup>11</sup> Bruner, *Matthew*, 69-70.

<sup>12</sup> John 15:5.

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 4:13.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, *Mark*, 196.