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Last Sunday we heard the Gospel writer Mark tell us about Jesus trying to get away to a quiet place for prayer, and even sending his disciples to the other side of the lake to get some rest, but before doing so, they encountered a crowd of hungry people. Mark's story was thin on details about this giant picnic, but the Gospel writer John gives us more details than Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Did you know this giant picnic narrative is the only story in all four Gospels? For them all to tell the same story makes me think that something really important happened that day.

This story is probably a familiar one. The crowd was hungry. Jesus asked his disciples to feed the crowd, which numbered around 4,999, right?

I know what you're thinking: *Wait a minute, Pastor, you're off on the count. It was 5000 people, not 4999.*

Well, how do you know? The narrator tells us it was *about* 5000, so 4999 is just as accurate a count. For that matter, it could have been 4998 or even 5001 or any other number, but who would ever refer to this story as the feeding of 5002?

There's something about round numbers that we seem to like. For example, how many of you when filling

your car with gas like to round off your purchase to \$30 rather than \$29.98?

Psychologists analyzed over a thousand self-pumped gas purchases at a convenience store in upstate New York. And they found that we love pumping gas to the nearest whole number.

Almost 60% of purchase values ended in .00 (zero cents). Another 7% ended in .01, which may be due to not being able to stop the pump in time to hit double zeroes.¹

Those of you who have step counters may also find yourself uncomfortable going to bed at night with only 37 steps left to reach your goal of 7000 or 10,000 steps. How many of you after looking at your smart watch in bed have gotten up to walk a bit just to reach your goal of a round number of steps? I must admit, I've done that a few times.

There's something about round numbers that we crave, but they also seem to indicate more than quantity, for we may seem to think they reflect quality. A 10,000-step day seems better than a 9963-step day. Getting a .99 special for a soda seems ok, but who wants to order a \$14.99 appetizer at a fancy restaurant? If the menu indicates it's \$15, we get the impression that it reflects better quality.

Maybe that's why we like to refer to the feeding of the 5000 rather than the feeding of 4999, for the story is more than just about the *quantity* of people Jesus served, it's about the *quality* of the event, which we often refer to as a miracle.

When the disciples saw the hungry crowd, Philip had a practical consideration when Jesus asked where they might find enough food to feed them. One translation has Philip responding: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a *little*" (NRSV) while another says, "Don't you know that it would take almost a year's wages just to buy only a *little* bread for each of these people?" (CEV). And what would be the point of giving everyone a *little* bread? That might even seem cruel. It would be like inviting friends to your house for a little meal, serving a cracker for appetizers, and then nothing else. "Sorry, that's all you get. We're on a tight budget. We told you it would be a *little* meal."

The disciple Andrew had an idea: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Once again, the narrator suggests the smallness of this idea, for the Greek word refers not to just any boy, but a *little* boy, and the food in the Greek is a *small* fish.

Do you begin to see a pattern here? The entire story seems to emphasize the smallness of all the acts—little bread, little boy, little fish. In other words, not much to write home about, and yet, all four Gospel writers wrote about this event, and amazingly, there was plenty of food to feed everyone, with enough leftovers to fill 12 baskets.

John used an interesting word to begin the picnic when he suggests that the disciples tell the crowd to **ἀναπίπτω** (an·ap·ip·to), a Greek word meaning "sit down," which the same writer later used when describing the disciples reclining with Jesus at the Last Supper. I wonder if John was trying to draw a parallel between this breaking of the bread with the crowd and the later breaking of bread with Jesus and his disciples during the Last Supper?

Both meals are amazing events: a small piece of bread that reminds us of something amazing, that God can take a little bit and turn it into something huge! When we break bread at this table, that small piece of bread reminds us of an amazing amount of love that God continues to send into the world through each of us. Isn't that amazing? Even when we feel we don't have enough, God offers us the miracle of enough.

Many are skeptic of miracles, for we don't know how to explain them, as a pastor discovered on a Sunday when speaking to a group of children.

In Sunday school the minister was trying to illustrate the word *miracle*. “Boys and girls,” the pastor said, “suppose I stood on the roof of a ten-story building, lost my balance, and fell off. Then all of a sudden, in midair, a whirlwind swept me up and brought me safely to the ground. Now what word would you use to describe this?”

After a long silence a boy raised his hand and said, “Luck?”

“True, true,” replied the minister. “It could be luck—but that’s not the word I wanted. I’ll repeat the story. There I am on top of the ten-story building again, and I fall. A whirlwind catches me in midair and places me safely on the ground. Think now—what word would describe the situation?”

“Accident,” cried out one girl.

“No, no,” answered the minister. “Listen carefully for the third time. I’m on that same building, I fall and am swept to safety by a sudden whirlwind. What word could account for my safely reaching the ground?”

The boys and girls shouted in unison: “Practice!”²

The feeding of the crowd was no accident, nor was it luck, it was the miracle of a small amount being enough, plenty, even with leftovers. Sometimes we may think what we do is insignificant, or that our congregation is small, but that’s the point. God doesn’t need a whole lot to offer the miracle of enough. What you do is enough, even the smallest of acts. What we do together is enough, even as a small congregation. For together we trust in the miracle that God can do with just a small amount, which is enough.

¹ “Our Odd Attraction to Round Numbers at the Gas Station,” Feb. 18, 2014, <https://priceconomics.com/our-odd-attraction-to-round-numbers-at-the-gas/>

² Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #578.