

The Multiplication Effect

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

August 26, 2012

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1 Kings 17:10–24 (NIV)

¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?”

¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

¹² “As surely as the LORD your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

¹³ Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land.’”

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.

¹⁷ Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. ¹⁸ She said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”

¹⁹ “Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the LORD, “LORD my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?” ²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the LORD, “LORD my God, let this boy’s life return to him!”

²² The LORD heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived. ²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive!”

²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth.”

Luke 9:10–17 (NIV)

¹⁰ When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, ¹¹ but the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.

¹² Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here.”

¹³ He replied, “You give them something to eat.”

They answered, “We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd.” ¹⁴ (About five thousand men were there.)

But he said to his disciples, “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” ¹⁵ The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. ¹⁶ Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. ¹⁷ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

To be radically hospitable is to expect the multiplication effect.

There’s a TV commercial on the air these days that comes to mind when I think of the multiplication effect. I can’t remember the product being sold but the commercial goes like this: someone does a small kindness for someone, and then the person for whom the kindness was done goes on to do something kind for another person, and on the chain goes. One kind word, one simple welcome, one act of grace leads to many: the multiplication effect.

So it was with Elijah and a desperately poor widow who took him in.

When Elijah arrives on the scene in 1 Kings 17, he heads immediately for King Ahab of the northern kingdom, Israel. The writer of Kings prepares us for what is coming. We are told that though the kings of Israel and Judah had been a bad lot, Ahab was the worst, for he served and worshiped the Canaanite god, Baal. Ahab was led there by his infamous wife, Jezebel, a princess from Tyre-Sidon.

Elijah, Ahab, and Jezebel

The book of Kings (1 and 2 Kings are a single literary work) tells the story of the twelve tribes' transition from the united kingdom of Israel under Saul, David, and Solomon to two sister kingdoms that are eventually overrun by conquerors. (see the page two textbox)

In 869BC, Ahab ascended to the throne of Israel, the northern kingdom. Though most of the kings before and after Ahab "did evil" in God's sight, Ahab "did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:30).

Ahab married Jezebel, a foreigner, and turned to the worship of Baal, the supreme god of the Canaanites. It is here that we meet the prophet Elijah, who intervened in the religious crisis brought on by Ahab and Jezebel. The story of Elijah's confrontation with Jezebel and with the priests of Baal is one of the great biblical narratives. Later, Elijah does not die but, instead, is taken to heaven in a whirlwind, riding a chariot of fire. Elijah's prophetic successor was Elisha, whose ministry to the kingdom of Israel lasted nearly fifty years, to 800BC or so.

The first challenge that Elijah lays down before Ahab sets the stage for all that follows. In the arid regions of Palestine, rain was scarce and life-giving. Baal was worshiped as the bringer of rain. Thus, when Elijah promises the Baal-worshipping Ahab a drought, he is saying that Baal is a fraud, that Baal cannot bring rain. Baal cannot give life. Instead, life is YHWH's alone to give and to take away. The stories that follow are all stories of the LORD God's life-giving power.

God tells Elijah to flee from Ahab and hide in a ravine. God has ordered ravens¹ to feed him there. Then, when the brook has dried up for lack of rain, God sends Elijah to see a widow, whom God will also instruct to feed Elijah.

However, when Elijah arrives, the widow can't feed herself and her son, much less Elijah. Elijah asks only for some bread and water. But she has no bread. Indeed, she is so desperate that she is about to head out and collect a few sticks for fire-making. She will take the small amount of flour she has left and make one last meal for her and her young son. Then, the two of them will lie down to die – for death is what drought and famine bring.

But Elijah tells her not to be afraid. She should go ahead and make the bread without fear, because she will see that her jars and flour and oil will not run out. God has decreed this. Not only will Elijah be saved, but so will be the woman and her son.

This is God's life-giving power at work through the simple means of a meal and a table. Then, just in case we've missed the point, the widow's son becomes ill and dies. Elijah prays over the boy and God restores him to life. It is all about life, life, and more life. But the story begins with an act of hospitality. It is the multiplication effect at work, for Elijah would go on to proclaim to Israel that there is, in fact, only one God, the LORD God, and embarrassing and slaying the priests of Baal on the hill called Carmel (see 1 Kings 18).

Of course, the most famous story of multiplication and a meal is the story told in all four gospels of Jesus, the crowds, some loaves, and a few fish.

A Simple Story

It isn't hard to understand why children like this story. It is simple and easy to visualize. A huge and hungry crowd is gathered on a Galilean hillside. Having only five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus blesses and miraculously multiplies the food so it is sufficient to feed perhaps 20,000 people with food left over! (Note – though the story is often referred to as

¹We always have to be ready for and open to God's surprises. Here, God uses ravens, unclean animals (Leviticus 11:15), to give life to Elijah. There simply is no box big enough to contain God. How has God surprised you in the last week?

the “feeding of the five thousand,” the figure refers only to the men in the crowd, so 20,000 is a reasonable estimate.)

But children are not the only ones to have treasured this story. Of all the miracles recounted in the gospels, this is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. In fact, there are two more accounts of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands. As we’d expect, each gospel writer tells the story a little differently. John tells us that a boy brought forward the few loaves and fishes. More than the others, John’s telling of the meal evokes memories of the Exodus and of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. Mark has more detail and emphasizes

The Loaves and Fish

The symbol of the loaves and fishes in our rose window serves to remind us of Jesus’ power and that he is the “bread of life.” It also reminds us that each day God provides for our most basic needs. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer we ask God for our daily bread. But, perhaps most importantly, this symbol reminds us of our own responsibility to do all we can to multiply the people of God. We are to be the light to the world so that others may see our good works and give glory to God (Matt 5:16).

At St. Andrew, we begin our multiplication by inviting people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another. We extend our multiplication through mission projects like those in Costa Rica and in our food pantry and in the loving witness we carry into the communities in which we live and work.

Jesus’ compassion. More explicitly than the others, Luke ties together the disciples’ mission to build the kingdom and the power of Jesus’ work with the crowds. This is how it is with the gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John may all work with the same material, but each use it to paint a distinctive portrait of Jesus.

Luke’s story

So, what is the attraction of this particular miracle? Why, of all the miracles Jesus performed during his public ministry, is this the only one preserved by all the gospel writers? Yes, it is spectacular, but no more so than Jesus’ resuscitation of Lazarus after he had been dead four days. There were other large crowds that witnessed Jesus’ miracles, though probably few as large as 20,000. Perhaps Luke’s simple account will help us understand the significance to the gospel writers of this particular story.

Jesus had recently sent out the Twelve to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Luke 9:2). Upon their return, the twelve had accompanied Jesus to a retreat of sorts in Bethsaida to get away for a bit.

But, of course, the crowds track him down and follow. Jesus, of course, welcomes them and sets out to teach and to heal. Jesus is not upset with the crowds who press in on him; rather, he has compassion for them and cures their sick.

Late in the day, the disciples come to Jesus, pointing out that they are out in the middle of nowhere and it is time for everyone to head off and find something to eat in the nearby villages. But Jesus says no; everyone can stay. Though only five loaves of bread and two fish can be found, Jesus looks to heaven, blesses the food, hands it to his disciples . . . *and Jesus is not referred to again in this story.* Perhaps the significance of this miracle story lies here.

It is Jesus who takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and multiplies it . . . but it is the disciples who actually distribute the food, feed the crowds, and collect the leftovers. Jesus is the power behind the feeding, but the disciples are the ones who do the work. Jesus *doesn’t* wave a magic wand over the crowd so that food might appear in everyone’s lap or that hungry tummies will be magically full. This is why the miraculous feeding is in all four gospels . . . the entire miracle story is a metaphor for how Jesus will work. Jesus’ work will be done by others, during his ministry and after his death. Jesus is teaching his disciples what his ministry is all about. He doesn’t just tell them, he shows them. The work of building God’s kingdom will be done through the disciples, then and now.

Thus, the radical hospitality we are to extend to all is the concrete enactment of Jesus’ own welcome. Our multiplication effect is the multiplication of Jesus’ grace. There is actually nothing radical about it at all – it is the simple expression of the kingdom of God.

The Hospitality Code – Providing Hospitality and Departing
from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*

The provision and protection extended in hospitality were well defined and elaborate. Acceptance of strangers as guests was signified by washing the guests' feet (Gen 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; neglected in Lk 7:36–50) and by providing a meal. The meal, prepared and served by women and household servants, might be lavish and could include entertainment (music, dancing) and discussion of Torah. In order not to insult the guests and dishonor the host, the meal must be the best the host could provide, as with the choice calf, curds and milk that Abraham provided for three angelic visitors. Additional honor would be signified by inviting a (male) guest to speak or anointing his head with oil and by giving him an honored place at the host's table. It was also the duty of the host to provide protection from harm (Gen 23:7–9; Josh 2:1–6; 2 Kings 6:22–23; cf. Gen 19, where Lot is unable to fulfill this duty). The reference in Psalm 23:5 to a table prepared in the presence of enemies may refer to the desert code of hospitality in which the fugitive from blood vengeance could find safety within a tent for the space of one day and two nights. Significantly, this psalm ends with the poet contrasting such temporary hospitality to God's house, in which he can dwell (literally "return to") forever.

Departure was the final phase in the cycle of hospitality. Customarily guests could expect to stay in one household for no more than two nights (cf. *Didache* 11.5). It would be rude and dishonorable for a guest to prolong the stay unless the host clearly extended the invitation (the extended stay in Judg 19:1–9 is extraordinary). The goal at this final phase of hospitality was to have the guest depart in peace without having disrupted the social harmony of the household or the community-as when Isaac sends Abimelech and his advisers off after a feast celebrating a peace treaty (Gen 26:26–31). A generous host would send guests off well fed and supplied for the journey (*Didache* 11.6, 12 suggests sending missionaries off with food, but not money; cf. Rom 15:24).

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, 1 Kings 16:29 – 17:9 Ahab becomes king of Israel and Elijah arrives to bring him God's word.	Tuesday, 1 Kings 18:16-46 Too good a story to pass up while we are in 1 Kings!
Wednesday, Matthew 14:13-21 Matthew's telling of the story of the multiplication.	Thursday, John 6:5-13 John's telling of the story.
Friday, Romans 12:3-13 Paul instructs the believers to be hospitable and humbly serve one another in the body of Christ.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John
Meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation
Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons."
You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon.

There is also an archive of nearly 500 studies at www.scottengle.org