

The Gospel today tells of the miraculous feeding of 5,000 people with only two fish and five loaves of bread. The story is straightforward. Our Lord's disciples saw a developing problem – a large crowd of hungry people, and recognized that there was real potential for trouble, when the crowd figured out that there was no food. The disciples offered pragmatic advice; "Send them home before we have trouble on our hands." Our Lord's reaction was one of "Where's the problem? You say that you have five loaves and two fish? Bring the food to me." He blessed the food and distributed it, and there were twelve baskets filled with leftovers, after the meal was done.

We have difficulty with this type of miracle story, because it seems both irrational and improbable. It is tempting to dismiss it out of hand. We can argue that the ancient world was far more accepting of magical thinking and simplistic in their assumptions and understanding. What we cannot argue against is that the early Church found great reassurance in this story. It affirmed, for them, the abundance of God's grace, intentionally bestowed on those having faith in Jesus Christ. This story occurs, with minor variation, in all four of the gospels. It is powerfully fortified with symbolism, not lost on the early Church. When we become aware of this, and let this story inform us as it did the early Church, by suspending our rational dissection just long enough to learn from this text, we can let this story increase our faith, because we can see it through the eyes of faith and feel it with the heart. I am not asking that we accept it literally, because most of us cannot and therefore will not do that. What I'm saying is look at the symbols, reflect on the story as speaking about faith and understand this as the early Church did. Then know, in faith, the power and wonder of a merciful and gracious God.

The first observation that we make is that God, in Christ, knows our needs even before we ask, and our Lord is proactive in nourishing us, physically as well as spiritually; but the spiritual nourishment is, by far, what is most important. In this story, Jesus was proactive in blessing the bread and fish, and his chosen twelve distributed the food. This suggests to us that God, in Christ, reaches out to us continuously, nurturing us, sustaining us in grace, nudging us and guiding us as we try to be faithful followers. The key point is that God is proactive in the distribution of his grace, and certainly this is true when the grace we receive empowers us to do God's work in this world.

We should also take note of the number symbolism in this gospel story. While we may superstitiously have our lucky number or numbers, or our favorite lotto pick, numbers do not carry for us the tremendous symbolic value they did for ancient Jews and the early Christian Church. Two of the most symbolically powerful numbers, for ancient Jews and early Christians, powerful, that is, in lending meaning to the Kingdom of God and the future reign of Christ, were the numbers "seven" and "twelve." You might want to research this sometime, but in a nutshell, "seven" represented divine perfection and completeness and "twelve," like "seven," was also symbolic of perfection and completion, but with a strong sense of perfection as being fulfillment. Thus our Lord's use of seven bits of food to feed the masses, with twelve baskets of food left over tells us

that that which is little, in Jesus is more than enough. In this story, Jesus took that which the twelve disciples could bring him, five loaves of bread and two fish being seven bits of food, and used this to satisfied the needs of thousands. In Christ, these few bits of food were sufficient for the needs of all. And through Christ, even after the crowd's needs were met, there was sufficient remaining for all the needs of others.

The story taught the early Church that Jesus was sufficient for all that came to him. His grace was plentiful; it could not be exhausted. They could bring others to the knowledge and love of God in Christ without worry of whether there would be room in the Church for them. The grace of God, through the merits of Jesus Christ is not only sufficient for all in this world who turn to Christ for salvation, but is more than sufficient for the needs of all humanity until the end of time. There is a message in this for us, too. There is no need for us to hoard Jesus. There is more than enough Jesus to go around. Indeed, we have an obligation to spread the good news of the abundance of God's grace that we receive as members of the community of the faithful, those baptized into the family of Almighty God.

When we let this story inform us of our Christian responsibility and obligation, the story reminds us that as baptized members of the body of Christ, we are called to discipleship. As disciples, we have an obligation to know Christ and to make him known. This is our mission, our sacred duty. We can plead inadequacy, but no matter how inadequate we feel that we are, what we bring to Jesus is enough to do our sacred duty, because Christ Jesus will multiply our skills, gifts and abilities just as he multiplied the fish and the loaves. When we do the work of Christ, when we are determined to be disciples of the Master, proclaiming the Gospel in thought, word and deed to those still living in darkness, we are sufficiently equipped. Christ takes what we bring, small or great, and perfects us to do his work in this world. And, at the end of the day, when we have done all we can to serve our Savior, we will be pleased to find that we still have sufficient reserves to continue the work of being Christ to our neighbor each and every day of our lives. *Amen.*