

## Of Loaves and Fishes and Grinches and Beads

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Scripture: Mark 6:35-44

As some of you know, I teach at the University of Michigan Law School. My courses include one in Evidence—the rules that determine what a jury may and may not consider during a trial. I’ve taught this subject for more than thirty years and I find it fascinating. If we’re ever seated next to each other at a dinner party, I will bore you senseless talking about it.

Early in my teaching, I realized that many of my students assumed that the best evidence comes in the form of eyewitness testimony. In my experience, most non-lawyers think this way, too. If we want to know whether something happened, we often begin by asking whether anyone *saw* it happen. We tend to view eyewitness testimony as uniquely reliable.

Social scientists and trial lawyers will tell you that it doesn’t exactly work that way. In fact, eyewitness testimony can suffer from all sorts of problems. A witness’s testimony can be distorted by their memory, their suggestibility, their assumptions,

their biases, or their failures of perception. Indeed, none of us is as observant as we think we are; when Sherlock Holmes says to Dr. Watson “You see but you do not observe” he might as well be talking to everyone but himself.

To make the point to my students, I engage them in a little exercise. At the beginning of a class, I hand out small pieces of paper for them to write on. I say: “Okay, I’ve been standing right in front of you for a few weeks and you’ve had plenty of opportunities to observe me. I’m going to leave the room. While I’m out, please write down your estimates of my height, my weight, and my age. And please describe the clothes I wore to class yesterday.” About ten minutes later I return and collect the results.

Every year, things play out the same way—the students’ perceptions of me vary wildly. Guesses at my height range from 5’6” to 6’2”; my weight ranges from 150 pounds to 230 pounds; my age ranges from 50 to 70. And almost no one has the foggiest idea of how I was dressed the day before—even though I stood before them for more than an hour. By the way, since you’re now all staring and trying to guess the answers to these questions I will tell you that I’m about 5’8, weigh around 195 pounds, and am 61 years old, which explains why I’m always tempted to give an A to the students who put me at 6’2 and 50.

Eyewitnesses perceive things differently—sometimes very differently. And having *more* witnesses does not necessarily help. Indeed, as my class experiment shows, additional witnesses can just mean additional variations.

Understanding this reality about eyewitness testimony helps with the business of biblical interpretation. Religious skeptics sometimes point out that the scriptures give us inconsistent accounts of what happened around a particular event. For example, the four gospel accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection differ significantly in their details. And that's a story we might think would be reported consistently given the fact that, well, it's sort of important, being the foundation of our religion and all.

But those differences do absolutely nothing to undermine my faith. To the contrary, they are exactly what I would expect to find in reports of what eyewitnesses say they saw. If people did indeed see something, they will vary in how they describe it.

In this sense, inconsistencies serve as a source of comfort. Paradoxically, they reassure us that the thing witnessed actually happened. So, sure, my students may vary in their guesses about my height, weight, age, and clothing. But not one of them harbors any doubt that I am indeed the guy who has been standing in front of them for weeks, talking to them about Evidence. No student has ever written on

their piece of paper: “I do not know who you are. I have never seen you before.” In other words, testimony from multiple witnesses can differ in its details, but it tends to be consistent with respect to “the big picture”—which can also help us understand what the big picture *is*.

And so it goes with the eyewitness narratives we encounter in the Bible. Stories may differ in their details, but often the details frankly don’t matter much. The point of the story is that *something amazing happened*, and the stories will align in general terms about *what that something amazing was*.

This brings us to our scripture for today, the story of the loaves and the fish and the feeding of the multitude. The scriptures give us a number of different versions of this story. Some passages describe this as a miracle involving five loaves and two fish, some as involving seven loaves and a few fish; some say that Jesus fed five thousand, some say he fed four; some say the disciples collected the leftovers in twelve small baskets, some say they used seven bigger ones; some versions suggest we’re talking about one miracle, others indicate we’re talking about two.

Should these variations trouble us? I think not at all. As I’ve suggested, these sorts of differences in accounts are completely consistent with what we routinely find when multiple witnesses see the same thing. Besides, all of the versions agree

that *something amazing happened* and agree in general terms about *what that something amazing was*. And remember: in life, we want to strive to become seers of miracles—not counters of fishes.

But here’s the main thing: I believe there is one number that matters more than all of those I just gave you—the number four. The feeding of the multitudes is the *only* miracle reported in *all four* of the gospels: Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9, and John 6. Clearly, something very important is going on in this story. I can almost hear our heavenly parent saying—as parents around the world do with considerable frequency—“how many times do I have to tell you?”

It’s tempting to think that the importance of this story lies in the magnitude of the miracle. After all, feeding thousands of people with a handful of bread and fish makes for one impressive feat. But I don’t think that’s the answer. After all, raising Lazarus from the dead seems at least as remarkable and that story appears only in the gospel of John.

No, in my view this story derives its importance primarily from the *attitude of the disciples* that prompts Jesus *to perform the miracle*. In other words, I think this story matters so much—and has so much to teach us—not because of *what Jesus does* but because of *why he does it*. Of course, to some extent he multiplied the loaves and fish because he had lots of hungry people on his hands and felt

compassion for them. But I think he also did it because of something his disciples *said* that he felt compelled to *correct*.

On this point, the gospel narratives are extraordinarily consistent. In every one of them, the disciples say it is impossible to feed the gathered crowd with what they have. The details vary: for example, in Matthew 14 the disciples say: “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish” while in John 6 they say “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” But the thrust of their remarks is identical in every gospel: we don’t have enough. In each of the gospels, the disciples express an attitude of *scarcity*—and in each of the gospels Jesus shows them to be *wrong*. “Not enough? Here, start passing the fish.”

Jesus conveys this anti-scarcity message over and over and over again. Indeed, it lies at the center of many of the most familiar of gospel stories. Remember the story of “the widow’s mite”: A poor widow contributed all she had to the treasury of the house of God. She could have held back—after all, money was scarce. But she did not and Jesus blessed her for it. (Mark 12) Or this story: A woman broke open a bottle of costly ointment and rubbed it into Jesus’s hair. Some of those present complained that she had “wasted” it—after all, such ointment was scarce. But Jesus *admonished* them and *blessed* her. (Mark 14)

Now, I want you to notice something about all of these stories—they involve *real* scarcity. In contrast, we human beings can sometimes indulge in a *false* attitude of scarcity. We *manufacture* a scarcity concern that does not actually exist and then use it to justify our behavior. Let me give you a trivial—but pointed—example that comes from a recent experience ... because, you know, when you do sermons you walk through life looking for parables. And you find a lot of them. So here's my latest.

Lisa and I love New Orleans and the festive weeks leading up to Mardi Gras. As many of you know, lots of beads get thrown during Mardi Gras, sometimes under circumstances that have given the practice a regrettably sketchy reputation. But here's what you need to understand if you've never been: thousands and thousands and thousands of strands of beads get thrown to people during Mardi Gras, mostly during parades from floats. Late at night, the streets are littered with them—they crunch under your feet. And all you need to do to get someone to throw some to you is wave and yell.

There's a grand Mardi Gras tradition that if you catch a strand of beads you look around to see if anyone near you needs some. If so, you give them away. On Mardi Gras itself—the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday—Lisa and I found ourselves in a parade stand surrounded by people who were giving beads away as fast as they

could catch them—to strangers, to children, to the less mobile among us. An elderly woman visiting from England, who couldn't stand up to catch any herself, laughed in delight as people around her draped dozens of strands about her neck. "Does she have purple?" I heard someone yell. "I've got an excellent purple!"

But then there was "that guy" and, as we all know, you never want to be "that guy." He caught lots of beads, sometimes snagging them from the outstretched hands of others—and then kept them. He accumulated quite a stash, at one point bragging that last year he had brought home many pounds of them. Lisa leaned over to me and whispered conspiratorily: "We have a bead hog in our midst." And here's my point: the bead hog had brought an attitude of scarcity to an activity where there was anything but. Whatever shortages exist in the world, I'm here to tell you that there is no deficit of beads in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the days leading up to Lent.

Now, contrast this with the Bible stories I referenced a moment ago. If you've got thousands of people to feed, then having a few loaves and fish is *genuine* scarcity. If you're poor like the widow, then the money you give the church comes from *genuine* scarcity. If ointment is rare, then by definition there is a *genuine* scarcity of it. And yet, even in those circumstances where *true* scarcity exists, Jesus tells us that we must have an attitude of abundance.

And Jesus tells us this—as he tells us *all* things—because he loves us more than we can imagine. He understood that an attitude of abundance makes our lives—and the lives of everyone around us—better. An attitude of scarcity, in contrast, breeds a smallness of heart and a corresponding smallness of life. Have you ever met a *sad* person who had an attitude of abundance? Neither have I. Have you ever met a *spiritually mature* person who had an attitude of scarcity? Me either.

This is, of course, the point of one of the famous stories of that other gospel writer—Dr. Seuss. The greedy Grinch that we meet at the beginning of his story has a shriveled, tiny heart that is “two sizes too small.” The generous Grinch that emerges at the end of the tale has a heart three times bigger—and, to go along with it, the “strength of ten Grinches, plus two!” We are all human beings and therefore, alas, full of Grinch potential. The question is: *which* Grinch are we going to be? The petty and childish one at the beginning? Or the spiritually mature one at the end?

Now, Jesus does not promise us that maintaining an attitude of abundance will come easily. He knew that genuine scarcity exists—indeed, he was surrounded by it. And he understood how easily an attitude of scarcity can infect our hearts

and the hearts of everyone with whom we interact. He realized the temptations that exist to become *that* Grinch and *that* guy.

But he also understood that an attitude of abundance has its *own* infectious quality. If we sow it, we will reap it. If we model it, others will embrace it. Many of us give to worthwhile organizations that try to address the genuine scarcities of the world—like Leelanau Christian Neighbors—because *someone else* pointed the way for us out of their *spirit of abundance*.

Going through life with an attitude of abundance is like riding along on a float and throwing love off into a crowd of people you don't even know. By this, Jesus said, everyone will know that we are his disciples. They will know that we are Christians by our love.

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Perhaps you're wondering: what became of the bead hog? Well, he wandered away for a while but then he came back. At first, I thought he seemed a bit sheepish—but then he sidled right up next to the street where the opportunities for catching things were the best. I thought to myself: "Wow. He's watching all these people give all this stuff away and he *still* doesn't get it."

But then a very special prize much rarer than a strand of beads—a bright yellow plastic horn—flew from a float, passed through his fingers, and dropped at

his feet behind him. He spun around, snatched it up, paused for a moment, and then handed it to me. Then he caught another prize—a foam football—and passed it to a boy standing next to him. Sure, he still kept some beads—as did we all. But he was giving them away as well.

When last I saw him, he was headed away from the parade with his wife, working his way through the throngs of people. In addition to some strands of beads, he was wearing something else—something I hadn't seen on him all day long. It was a faint, but clearly discernible, smile. For the first time, he looked happy.

Who knows?

Perhaps it was because his heart had grown three times bigger that day.

Ah, praise God that it might be so.

And the people said: Amen.