

"Material for Miracles"

There is a story in the Gospel of John where a little boy is an unsung hero! Jesus' popularity with the crowds is growing. Time and again great numbers of people come to hear Him speak, and be healed of their illnesses. There were so many people wanting Jesus that He and the 12 disciples often had trouble being by themselves – to talk, to rest, to eat. This was one of those times.

Jesus had set out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee with His disciples. He wanted to cut across a corner of the lake (about a 4 mile ride) and find a spot on the northeast shore away from the crowd. But the crowd could see where He was heading, and walked around the shore! It was long walk. They were tired...and hungry. As Jesus saw them coming He got concerned. He asks Philip: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" (John 6:5). John writes that Jesus asked Philip this to test him – for He knew what He would do.

Philip, taken aback, responds, "Two hundred denarii aren't enough to feed this mob." That was about 6 months salary for the common worker back then. And that would only buy enough to give them a little bit each! Another disciple pipes up – Andrew. "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" (John 6:9).

Note here: the "loaves" are not huge, long loaves, but more like rolls or buns. Second, "barley" loaves are the cheapest of all breads, the bread of the poor. And also, the 2 "fish" are not big tunas or large bass, but tiny, pickled fish found in the Sea of Galilee – about the size of sardines! It's hardly enough for 2 or 3 people, let alone thousands.

But Jesus says, "Make the people sit down" (John 6:10). It was a grassy area. It says there were 5,000 *men*. There were more people there, because they didn't count women and children. Then an incredible thing happened: "Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, *as much as they wanted*" (verse 11).

"As much as they wanted!" But there's more! "When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, *they filled twelve baskets*" (verses 12-13). "When they were satisfied" – the Greek word means stuffed, gluttoned! And notice, the *leftovers* filled *12 baskets* – more than what they started with!

I can't explain what happened that day, on a grassy plain, by the Sea of Galilee. But something mysterious and miraculous happened because of Jesus! Five small buns of barley bread (the cheapest bread around). Two sardine-sized fish. And in the hands of Jesus it was multiplied into a miracle.

The five loaves and two fish belonged to a little boy. We don't know his name. We don't know why he was there (were his parents with him?). Why did he, and not the others, apparently have some food. *But because a young boy was willing to give his food to Jesus, to give his meal away, something amazing took place.*

I think the story of the loaves and fish can be a tonic, a picker-upper, a message of hope when so many of us are down these days!

First, let's remind ourselves that the need is great. Well over 5,000 people came to hear Jesus. They were tired, hungry. There were no restaurants around, no concession stands nearby, no caterers to provide a massive feed for a stadium sized crowd.

I need not tell you that the need is great in our country, in the world. COVID hangs on, hospitals are full again, people are dying, and COVID continues to make life miserable for so many people. Floods in the eastern United States. Fires out west. Chaos at our Mexican border. Americans and their friends left behind in Afghanistan.

The need is great, but the resources are limited. What are 5 loaves and 2 fish among so many? Andrew asks. And he's right. In light of all the bad stuff happening today, can't we easily feel overwhelmed, helpless? I mean, what can I do? Most of us are just ordinary people, with our own problems and worries and limitations. I wonder if that little boy in the story might have wondered the same when Jesus asked him, "Can I have your lunch?"

But in the hands of the Master, miracles can happen! A little boy was willing to give what he had, and all heaven broke loose! The 5 small loaves and 2 tiny fish were "material for miracles".

*When you and I are willing to give what little we have over to Jesus, miracles can take place!
We are "material for miracles"!*

In a sense, a miracle takes place when we first come to faith in Jesus. We become a Christian, not just when we *believe the right stuff about Jesus*, but when we *surrender our life and will over to Christ*. When we do, He begins to change us. He forgives our sins. He gives joy and peace within. He gives new purpose for living, new strength for each day. Jesus said He came that we might have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10). And this change that takes place in our life is no less than a miracle.

There's a gospel song, "It Took a Miracle". It says, "It took a miracle to put the stars in place; it took a miracle to hang the world in space; but when He saved my soul, cleansed and made me whole, it took a miracle of love and grace." If you've never done it before, will you surrender your life to Christ, and let Him begin to change you – and it's all for the good!

Five loaves, two fish, material for miracles. *When we give what little we have to the Lord, miracles can happen!* I read about a lady in a church in Seattle, Washington, who for 40 years has had what her pastor described as an "awe-inspiring" ministry to street people in Seattle. When asked her secret, she replied: "If you want to have ministry on the streets, then walk slowly, and it will happen to you. If you want to avoid it, then walk fast." Her slow walk, and caring heart, became "material for miracles."

There's a young girl names Sarah. Sarah came from a family where there was little love. Criticism, fighting, ridicule were the rule. There was never an "I love you" or "I am sorry, forgive me." Then Sarah found a new self through faith in Christ. She met Jesus, and gave Him what she had.

She began to act differently at home. She'd stop in the middle of a fight and ask to be forgiven. She began to say, "I love you, Mom", "I love you, Dad." She began giving hugs. She began returning blessings for curses, compliments for ridicule, forgiveness when wronged. And over a period of two years of giving out love to her parents and brothers and sisters, the entire family met Jesus and gave themselves over to His love. Her gracious spirit in the midst of a poisonous atmosphere became "material for miracles."

Some 15 years after the Vietnam War ended, World Vision President Bob Seiple visited war-torn Vietnam. He wanted to offer the services of that humanitarian organization to that devastated country. The leaders of North Vietnam dismissed World Vision's letter of introduction from then President Ronald Reagan, and refused to allow World Vision to help. Then Seiple's 12 year old son spoke up: "I think you ought to listen to my dad. He only wants to help you. I know my dad. He can help you if you'll let him." With this, the entire atmosphere changed, and the relief program was approved. The simply, honest, heartfelt words of a 12 year-old became "material for miracles".

The needs are so great, and often we have so little to offer. Twelve ministers – clergy - were on a plane going to a conference. When they flew into a large storm, they told the flight attendants to tell the pilot that everything would be okay because 12 pastors were on board. Later, one flight attendant returned from the cockpit. "What did the pilot say?" one of the preachers asked playfully. She answered, "He said he was glad to have 12 ministers aboard, but he'd rather have four good engines."

Is there anyone of us who hasn't heard of Oprah Winfrey? Oprah was born in a small farming community in Mississippi. Sexually molested by a number of male relatives during her childhood and early teens, she became pregnant at age 14. Her son was born prematurely, and died in infancy. She was then sent to live with her father, Vernon, in Nashville, TN.

She gained fame through The Oprah Winfrey Show. I remember when she was being honored during an Emmy Awards ceremony, one clip was shown where she told how when she was young, she wanted to do something for God. She gave her life to God, asking that God would use her. Her show very often became nothing short of inspirational. She says, "My show is really a ministry, a ministry that doesn't ask for money...I can't tell you how many lives we've changed- or inspired to change." I may not agree with some of Oprah's views or theology, but who can deny that she has helped many, many people. Early on, Oprah gave what she had to Jesus, and her humble beginnings and turbulent childhood became "material for miracles".

Then there is William Carey. If you go to Leicester, England, and ask to see William Carey's place, you'll go to a storefront on which is a large sign with these words on it: "Expect great

things from God; Attempt great things for God." These words were William Carey's life motto. Carey was not born of wealth or social standing. As a young adult with a brilliant mind, he wound up cobbling shoes in downtown Leicester. But he cobbled shoes for the glory of God.

Surprisingly, this shoemaker went to church authorities and offered himself as a missionary to India. Sadly, the church was rather lukewarm on missions at the time and turned him down (perhaps skeptical of his ability). But he still felt a calling to missionary work, and believed when God finds one committed to His work He will find a way to get the work done. So, on his own, Carey founded a missionary society in 1792 and in 1793 he was on his way to India.

It turned out that Carey was able to quickly learn three of the languages spoken in India. This made it possible for him to communicate the message of Jesus wherever he went. He became a professor at a college in Calcutta and led many people to Christ. He had such an unquenchable devotion to his work, that church historians call him the "father of modern missions." In the hands of Jesus, what He gave to the Lord was multiplied and touched many lives for God.

A Christian man met regularly with other believers in a small group. One day he shared how in his job (a business) he was asked to do things that he felt were dishonest, and that he shouldn't do as a Christian. Yet he was in too low a position to do anything to change the company's way of doing business. He felt he ought to hunt for a new job. The group prayed for him, and for 9 months he sought new employment, but doors seemed to close. Finally, he said to the group, I think I'm supposed to stay where I am and let God change the business through me. Two weeks later a young salesman in the company who had been irreligious and immoral became a changed person through Christ. These 2 men formed a team. Once a week over lunch they met to pray for the business and for each of the office staff by name. Soon another man was added. Now the 3 met to pray for each other and their business associates.

Although not a word was said to anyone, within a year the ethics and philosophy and moral fiber of the company was so changed that not one of the 3 was asked to do a dishonest thing. It all began when one follower of Jesus – with little clout in the company - put himself and that business in the hands of the Master! And he became "material for miracles".

Five small buns of cheap bread. Two sardine sized fish. What's in your hand? Not much, you say? But whatever we have becomes material for miracles, when we give it over to Jesus.

Stugis, South Dakota. Bike Week. Ever hear of that? It's a huge motorcycle rally that takes place every year in August. It's 10 days of all sorts of events and entertainment. And from what I've read and heard, it gets kind of wild and raunchy. But a little boy chose this event this year to give away lemonade - to those who would donate money to Saint Jude. He collected \$32,600! I saw a Facebook posting of him, and forwarded it to my Facebook Friends. The lady in the photo with him is the Governor of South Dakota!

One young boy, \$32,600! Five loaves. Two fish. What's in your hands? Not much, you say. But what little you have, given over to Christ, could be a miracle waiting to happen!

