

LUKE 9:10-17**JESUS HAD DINNER WITH 5,000 PEOPLE**

How important is a meal? You might be surprised! A few years ago, the Council of Economic Advisers to the President reported, "The largest federally funded study of American teenagers found a strong association between regular family meals (five or more dinners per week with a parent) and academic success, psychological adjustment, and lower rates of alcohol use, drug use, early sexual behavior, and suicidal risks." A study by The Ohio State University found that "pre-school aged children are likely to have a lower risk of obesity if they engage regularly in one or more... specific household routines," and the first routine mentioned was eating dinner together as a family.

In these weeks leading up to and including Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter, we're considering seven stories found in the Gospel of Luke that all have one thing in common: Jesus having a meal with one or more people. "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" is the title of the message series. The answer is Jesus, of course. What happened when Jesus shared a meal with different people? Each story provides a context to learn more about Jesus, about God, about salvation, and about us. Now today's story features, without a doubt, the largest number of people who ever had dinner with Jesus on any one occasion. Let's read it right now and then think about it together.

Did you know that this is the only miracle of Jesus that's been recorded in all four Gospels? The feeding of the 5,000 was a pivotal and important event to the first followers of Jesus probably because it revealed something vital and significant about Jesus. It's interesting to compare Luke's version with that of Mark, Matthew, and John. The basic story is very much the same, but each account includes something a little different and unique from the other three. For example, it's only John that tells us that it was a little boy who was the one who had these five loaves of bread and two fish. He even tells us that the loaves were made out of barley which was the grain most used by poor people in that day and time. In fact, bread and fish were the two staples in the diet of poor people back then. The differences between the four accounts of this event are important because it proves that there was no attempt here at collaboration. By the same token, the agreement by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John on the basic story underlines that it really happened – it's historically reliable. Now, that's very important for the following reason. We worship and serve a...

GOD WORKS MIRACLES ROUTINELY.

You see, that's the big "problem" with this story according to some people. At its center is this miraculous multiplication of five small dinner-roll size bread loaves and two fish the size of sardines so that some 5,000 people were fed. Not only did everybody get as much as they wanted to eat, but there were leftovers, too! Many people find the Christian faith hard to accept because it so blatantly depends on the miraculous and supernatural for its claims to be true. No getting

around that! That's absolutely correct! The Christian faith absolutely depends on a God who has done and continues to do the miraculous. The Christian faith is built on two miracles: the incarnation and the resurrection. We believe that some 2,000 years ago God took on human flesh and personality in an actual human being history recognizes as Jesus of Nazareth. That's the incarnation. We also believe that same Jesus died on a cross and was literally and physically resurrected from the dead three days later. You can't be a real, genuine Christian if you think miracles are impossible.

Several years ago in Britain, researchers went door-to-door asking persons about their belief in God. One of their questions was: "Do you believe in a God who intervenes in human history, who changes the course of affairs, who performs miracles, etc.?" When it was published, their study took its title from the response of one man who was seen as rather typical of those who responded. He answered, "No, I don't believe in that God; I believe in the ordinary God." How many of our friends and neighbors believe in "just the ordinary God"? How many so-called Christians believe in a God who can't do miracles?

Now, those who dismiss miracles and want just an ordinary God - if they want any God at all - are terribly wrong about something very important. They've bought into the myth that science and reason have somehow made it impossible to believe in miracles. Nothing could be further from the truth! Science and reason can describe the miraculous – which is a great thing, by the way – but they can't explain how or why the miraculous happens. The fact is that God has made miracles mundane and routine. We just take miracles for granted. We experience countless miracles of one kind or another every day of our lives. They just don't seem special or incredible to us, because they're so frequent and abundant. Let me give you one example.

Just this week I watched a video featuring Alexander Tsiaras (see A ras), a mathematician and visual artist who uses special visualization software to explore the unseen human body. I wish we had time to watch it this morning, but put this in your Internet browser this week. ("Conception to Birth—Visualized," TED.com) You'll be amazed! He explains how his technology has enabled him to scan the development of the fetus from conception to birth. Although you hear nothing about his faith or his views on abortion, Tsiaras refers to what he calls the "marvel" and the "miracle" of an unborn baby's development. Tsiaras highlights the miracle of life with the following examples: At 44 days the fetus has become "something that you can recognize." At nine weeks it "is really like a kind of little human being." At 25-28 days, the baby's heart, which resembles a "magnificent origami," is developing at a rate of one million cells per second. By the time the fetus is full-term, it has 60,000 miles of vessels inside its body—although only one mile of vessels are visible. The other 59,999 miles of vessels are quietly working to bring nutrients and dispose of waste. Tsiaras calls a pregnant woman's body a "walking immunological cardiovascular system that ... can actually nurture and treat this child with the kind of marvel that is beyond

our comprehension." Tsiaras summarizes his talk by saying, "The complexity of these [facts about human development], the mathematic models of how these are indeed done are beyond human comprehension. Even though I am a mathematician, I look at this with marvel: How do these instruction sets not make mistakes as they build what is us? It's a mystery; it's magic; it's divinity [It's] beyond any comprehension of any existing mathematics today."

Most people don't consider the development of a baby in a woman's womb as being miraculous, but isn't it? Science and reason can describe it, but not explain it. Jesus turned water into wine on one occasion. A miracle, right? Yes, but God turns water into wine all the time. He creates a vegetable organism that can turn water, soil, and sunlight into a juice which will, under proper conditions, become wine. God is constantly turning water into wine! Science can describe it, but not explain it. Once, God Incarnate in the person of Jesus, made wine out of water in a moment. The miracle is in the short cut, but the end result is a miracle God does all the time. The multiplication of the bread and the fish to feed 5,000 people is much the same. Every year God makes a little wheat into a lot of wheat, a little corn into a lot of corn. By the same token, God has created fish that can procreate and multiply so that from just a few fish, multitudes of more fish are born who also procreate and multiply so that billions of people are fed the world over. Science and reason can describe it, but not explain it. People say, "But that's just normal. That's nature. That's natural processes!" Yes, but so much of what appears normal and natural is a miracle. Jesus' miracle was in the short cut. He did in a moment what God does all the time. We've just become immune to the spectacular and incredible. God works miracles routinely.

Why did Jesus do miracles? There are many reasons. Through His miracles, you see the power of God over nature – the physical universe. Through His miracles, you see the compassion and love of God because Jesus healed many people of diseases and disabilities. Through His miracles, you see the victory of God over sin, evil, and even death itself when Jesus raised people from the dead and was raised from the dead Himself. Through His miracles, you see that Jesus is God Incarnate – the One who proclaimed that this broken world belongs to His Father and that He had come to take it back. He had come to restore broken people back to a relationship with His Father by His own death and resurrection. This story teaches us something else about the God we worship and serve...

GOD WORKS MIRACLES THROUGH HIS PEOPLE.

Sure, the primary truth of this story is that God can do what no human being can do. It points to the all sufficiency of Jesus. If God can provide our physical nourishment, then He can and does provides everything else. Every human need at any level is met in God ultimately. You can't find truly abundant life by just indulging yourself in what this life has to offer. You can't find happiness by pursuing it. You can't create satisfaction on your own. All these come from God. This miracle demonstrated that God gives you more than you need. In business

terms, the supply outstripped the demand, didn't it? There were twelve baskets of leftovers! The Bible says, "And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus." (Ph 4:19 NLT) This miracle just illustrates that verse!

But here's a truth that's just as important for me, but it's not quite as obvious. Jesus performed this miracle through people - His disciples and a little boy. He literally used their hands, their feet, their energy and effort - along with the boy's little lunch - to feed those 5,000 people. Jesus could have made this miracle happen very differently. He could have demanded that bread just fall from Heaven, like the manna did back in the Old Testament. He could have created a loaf of bread in each person's pocket. He could have caused a huge school of fish from the Sea of Galilee – right next to where they were located - to beach themselves. But, instead, Jesus intentionally involved His disciples and a little boy when He performed this miracle.

It's been suggested that only Jesus and His disciples were actually aware of this miracle. It could have happened in such a way that the crowd was unaware that a miracle had occurred. This might explain why Luke doesn't mention any crowd reaction to such an incredible event. It also supports Jesus' reluctance in the Bible to perform miracles for the sake of just doing something spectacular. Maybe, just maybe, the real point of Jesus' miracle was to teach His disciples a spiritual lesson they'd never forget. It's been said, "Management is getting the right things done through other people." I don't know if Jesus was interested in being a great manager, but it's definitely true that more often than not, Jesus uses His people, His disciples, His followers – back then and even now – to do His work in this world. Sure, He could do everything on His own, but He prefers to work His miracles of grace and love through us instead of in spite of us.

There's been any number of urban legends about statues of Jesus where the hands or feet were blown or knocked off. Something like that definitely happened at Christ the King Catholic Church in San Diego back in 1980. Members of the church were dismayed when vandals marred their statue of Jesus located in a garden on church property. Now the statue's arms end at the sleeves - the outstretched hands of Jesus broken off. But instead of repairing the hands, the church placed a plaque at the base of the statue with the message: "I have no hands but yours." That thought goes back to a Roman Catholic saint from the 1500s, St. Teresa of Avila, who wrote the following poem: "Lord Christ, You have no body on earth but ours, No hands but ours, No feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which your compassion Must look out on the world. Ours are the feet by which you may still Go about doing good. Ours are the hands with which You bless people now. Bless our minds and bodies, That we may be a blessing to others. Amen." That truth – God works miracles through His people – is underlined in a deeper way in our story. We worship and serve...

GOD WORKS MIRACLES THROUGH HIS ORDINARY PEOPLE.

The disciples sized up the situation and made a very reasonable suggestion to Jesus. It was getting to be late afternoon. There was still time, however, for these 5,000 people to find food and shelter in the surrounding towns and villages. But Jesus needed to send them off without further delay. Instead, Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” (Lk 9:13 NLT) What? John’s account records more of the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ statement than Luke happens to include. “Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?... Even if we worked for months, we wouldn’t have enough money to feed them! ... There’s a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that with this huge crowd?” (John 6:5, 7, 9 NLT)

The disciples underlined what Jesus already knew. This was a situation beyond merely human abilities and resources. There wasn’t a Wendy’s or a Motel 6 anywhere in sight. The disciples looked in their wallets and said, “Lord, our VISA limit doesn’t go that high!” Then, why did Jesus say, “You give them something to eat” when He already knew that wasn’t possible? Because it was possible, in fact, with Jesus there. Here’s a big takeaway for both those disciples back then and for you and me as Jesus’ disciples today. Insufficient resources in the hands of ordinary people become sufficient and significant when put into the hands of Jesus. There’s an old Gospel song that puts it memorably – “little is much when God is in it.” Same idea. Same truth. Pastor and author, A.W. Tozer, put it like this, “Anything God has ever done, he can do now. Anything God has ever done anywhere, he can do here. Anything God has ever done for anyone, he can do for you.” Do you believe that?

The Bible has numerous examples of the fact that God actually prefers to use what appears to be inadequate, insufficient, unlikely, and insignificant to accomplish His will. That truth applies to unlikely instruments. God used a little dust to make the first human beings. God used a shepherd’s staff in the hands of Moses to pour out the plagues on Egypt. He used the jawbone of a donkey in the hands of Samson to kill 1,000 of Israel’s enemies. He used a sling and five smooth stones in the hands of David to kill the giant, Goliath. He used a handful of flour and a little olive oil in the hands of a widow to feed the prophet, Elijah. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it would move. Nothing would be impossible.” (Mt 17:20 NLT) Do you believe that?

God’s preference for the inadequate and insignificant extends to people, too. He loves – and actually prefers – to work through ordinary people who just give Him what they have. All Jesus needed that day were twelve scruffy, flawed men who would just do what He said to do. All Jesus needed that day was a little boy with his lunch of dry, coarse barley loaves and a couple of tiny fish to help the bread go down. God’s Word has people in mind – just ordinary human beings – when it says, “God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as

nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.” (1 Cor 1:27-29 NLT) That passage tells me why God prefers to work through ordinary people. He will not share His glory with another! He wants everyone to know that when something miraculous happens, when something incredible happens, when something life changing happens, it’s about God, not you, and not me. I love how a preacher from another generation, Philip Brooks, put it, “Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle.” Do you believe that?

Imagine the following with me this morning. Imagine Jesus Himself walking into this room today and coming up to this platform. He begins to talk about the tremendous needs of the people who live in the Northland community around this church: their hurts, their needs, their struggles, and their spiritual lostness. For those of us who don’t live in Northland, the message is the same. He describes the people who live in our families, our neighborhoods, the places where we work, and go to school who are broken, busted up, and screwed up. Then, when He’s done, He looks each of us in the eye and says, “You feed them. You meet their needs. You bring them to a saving knowledge of Me. You disciple them. You do it.” How would you feel? Overwhelmed. Inadequate. Hopeless. We’d react just like those twelve disciples reacted. We would offer back to Jesus what someone has called “the paralysis of human analysis.” We’d say, “Jesus, I don’t have enough strength, the needs are too great, there’s not enough money, I don’t have enough training yet, there’s too little time, I’m too busy, I just can’t do it!”

When it comes to God using and working through ordinary, insignificant people who seem to be inadequate, ill-prepared, lacking gifts and necessary abilities, I can do no better than to quote Rick Warren in his book *The Purpose Driven Life*. He writes there, “Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot, the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid. That is quite a variety of misfits, but God used each of them in his service. He will use you too if you stop making excuses.” Insufficient resources in the hands of ordinary people become sufficient and significant when put into the hands of Jesus. My little is much when God is in it. How many of you believe that?