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## God's Open Hand

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*Psalm 145:8-9; Matthew 14:13-21*

Lately I have been thinking about a little store that is not there anymore. It was alongside one of the belt routes here around Pittsburgh. It was in a little town, like almost every other little town that you go through when you are driving on one of those belt routes. I will not tell you whether it is the Blue Belt, or the Yellow Belt, or the Green Belt, or the Orange Belt, or the Red Belt — and I'm sure I've left out some belt.

At any rate, it was a one-room store, in a ramshackle house; yet it was the place where children wanted to go after school if they had a few pennies to spend on candy — a place where parents took their small children for ice cream out of one of those chest freezers.

At some point in the last twenty-five years, I am not exactly sure when, this store ceased to be. Oh, the ramshackle building is still there. But how unfortunate you would be if you were to show up at that rickety old screen door, hungry. Because no matter how much you thought you knew, how much you pleaded, or how much you cried, you would find that the door is locked. There is no one at home. You would go away as hungry as when you arrived — probably more so, since you expended all of the energy, and for nothing.

There are a lot of places like that in life — places where once you might have found what you needed. But either they are not there anymore, or they cannot provide what you are after. In contrast to that, we have this event in the life of Jesus, in His ministry of caring, in which the central act tells us that Jesus has more to give than people might expect to receive. Think of those people who were with Him. They expected to hear words of truth from Him. And I am glad they did, because, if you are going to find truth anywhere, you are going to find it in Jesus Christ. But they found more than that.

Lately I have been thinking about that little store, that is not there anymore, where I cannot get my hunger filled — and about Jesus, where I can. I have been thinking about how Jesus enacts God's will; so that hungry people are fed. Jesus anticipates the abundant blessing of goodness. Jesus works toward that day when God's kingdom is established in full. In Christ, we see that God cares deeply and passionately for those who are most vulnerable: the poor, the forgotten, the hungry. And just as Jesus put those disciples to work, God continues to use us to care for them.

Which prompts the question: Which is actually the greater miracle: for Jesus to transform those few loaves and fish into an abundance of blessings; or for Jesus to transform the hearts of the people, in order to show them how to trust and to share? Jesus gives it all away, with no strings attached. I like how Alan Brehm says it: *"When we give compassion freely, it ripples out far beyond our ability to explain or even imagine. Those streams of kindness and mercy that flow through us have an effect that only God knows."* (Alan Brehm, *The Waking Dreamer*, 2014)

What have you received from God's open hand? It is a fair question. What if you were to begin listing the things that God has given you, would you start with life itself? Would you talk about early blessings that came your way? Would you add things that make you distinctly you? Your personality. Your character. Your likes. And your dislikes. Your ability to learn. Your ability to share what you have learned. If these things did not come from God, where did they come from?

And what about the Christian's greatest gift — that is, freedom from the grip of sin, and consequently, death? Jesus gave you these things. No wonder you center your life on His life. No wonder you have modeled your actions after Christ. This gift, that you have received from God's open hand, is yours to enjoy. And, if you will, yours to share.

What part of all of that do you think is a miracle? A little? A lot? Some? All? How might you look at it, anew, in light of what Jesus did there on the seashore?

Every morsel of food fed every person present — as it was passed and shared, as it was received and eaten. Every bit of it was a gift from God's open hand. Those people on the seashore were extremely hungry. The disciples knew it. And the disciples wanted to provide for them. But they were not sure how.

The situation was such that logic said they should look elsewhere to satisfy their hunger — as people often do look elsewhere to satisfy that hunger. But look again at our Scripture lesson. There they are, in the presence of Jesus, with all that He has to offer, all that they can receive from God. Why would anyone look anywhere else? Jesus makes it clear, the place they need to look is to Him — to His open hand. What an encouragement this is!

The disciples were anxious and troubled about this matter. Perhaps the crowd was, too — although that is an open question. What we see happening here is the emergence of trust — the openness that comes of want and need. Not one of us would have faulted Jesus if He had said to the disciples, "Yes, that's a good idea; send them to a place where they can buy food and nourish themselves." Logic and practicality are not the whole answer, are they?

This miracle invites us to remember our own wildernesses, where abundance can happen — to remember our own places of chaos, where calm can prevail; our own insufficiencies, where Christ can be all in all.

Do you believe? Do you believe that God can work in ways that move beyond logic and practicality? Do you believe? Do you believe that God has something to give in a way that we were not expecting? Do you believe? Do you believe that God has an answer to your problem that you might not have thought of yet? Do you believe? Do you believe that God has a way to satisfy your hunger? Do you believe? This feeding of the 5,000 men, plus the women and children who were there, is an encouragement for you to believe these things.

I wish I could tell you exactly what God is going to say to you, and show you exactly what God is going to give to you. But I cannot do that. God is the only One who can. I am able to say: Trust God. Expect from God. Know that God is at work for good in your life.

Did you notice that Jesus went to a deserted place? Which tells us that there was no "there" there. Until Jesus got there. And then, it was deserted no longer. It was filled with love and grace, hope and healing, newness and nourishment — filled with everything else that the people needed.

Do you feel as if you are in some deserted place just now? Trust me. Jesus got there ahead of you — to make that desert blossom; to provide all you need, right there, where no one might have expected it, unless they knew how much Jesus cares for them.

Lately I have been thinking about a little store that is not there anymore. How much stock have you been placing in some little store that is not there anymore? In some solution to your problem that is less than divinely given? In some half measure? In some ramshackle setting, along some forgotten byway — a belt route that takes you meandering far afield from the way of Jesus Christ?

Alyce McKenzie, says: "... over and over again in life, we stand in the shoes of the disciples in this passage: surrounded by human need, faced with a challenge, knowing we do not have the resources, in our own wisdom, wealth, and strength, to meet the need, to stand up to the challenge." (Alyce McKenzie, *Edgy Exegesis*, Pathos, 2011)

Over and over again, we find ourselves in Jesus' presence, and then we are surrounded by grace, given what we need most, finding we have resources from Him that we did not know existed. His wisdom, His wealth, His strength will meet the need. And it will stand up to the challenge. Amen.