

When I was young, I took for granted how blessed I was by my parents. Maybe some of you can relate. When I wanted a snack, I would just go to the cupboard, and there they were. When I was cold, I could just adjust the thermostat or grab a blanket to warm up. If I was sick or in pain, my parents always had just what I needed to help me feel better. I didn't have to do anything for this, except maybe some chores just to take some stuff off of their hands every once in a while. My parents did all the work to keep me healthy, fed, and comfortable. Now it's not as if I was living like the prophet Elijah. In last week's Old Testament lesson we looked at how God provided for Elijah during the drought of King Ahab's rule. He sent ravens to provide bread and meat for the prophet as he hid in a ravine. And after he moved from that ravine he stayed with a widow and her son, whose oil and flour never ran dry as long as Elijah was with them. But God didn't send ravens to bring food, bandages, and other things to provide for my family. And unlike for the widow whom Elijah visited, the oil and flour we had wasn't an unending source; my parents had to go out and buy more every once in a while. Although it wasn't miraculous, God was providing for me through my parents.

Our Gospel message for today tells us of a time when Jesus did physically provide for those whom he loved through an amazing miracle. And although we cannot rely on miracles, we still learn from this account that God cares for us, and that he will provide for our needs, whether spiritual or physical.

Before this great miracle happens, we learn from the other gospel accounts that the twelve disciples had just come back from their mission. Jesus had sent them out to travel from village to village, preaching the good news to everyone they met, and he also gave them the authority to heal sickness and to drive out demons. When they came back from this journey, they must have been wearied from all their traveling, but they were rejoicing at how people listened to their message and marveling how even demons submitted to the authority Jesus had given them. And you can only imagine how their highest of highs dropped to their lowest of lows, when they heard that John the Baptist was dead. John

was a great prophet, the one who prepared the way for Christ, Jesus' earthly cousin, and King Herod had him executed at the request of a young girl. This news was surely distressing to the disciples, as some of them had once been disciples of John.

But Jesus recognized this. He knew what the disciples had just been through, and he too was distressed about the news of John's death. So, he had compassion on them. Of course, there was still work to be done, but Jesus knew that the disciples needed some time off. Besides, king Herod was now looking for Jesus, believing that he was John the Baptist raised from the dead. So Jesus got in a boat, and withdrew with his disciples. They sailed across the sea of Galilee to a place where they could get the rest that they needed, and where they could pray about all that had happened to them.

However, Jesus couldn't catch a break. Wherever Jesus went, there was sure to be a crowd following him. And this instance was no exception. Even though his withdrawal was intended to be private, many people still heard of it. The word spread, and Matthew tells us, "The crowds followed him on foot from the towns." Jesus and his disciples probably hadn't been resting long before his followers started showing up. Now, Jesus could have sent them away, saying "Guys, I can't do this right now. My disciples and I are tired and distressed, but come back tomorrow, and then we can talk." Jesus didn't do this. He didn't hide himself from these people because they needed him. These crowds had no ill intent in seeking out Jesus. Many were sick or demon possessed, and they all needed to hear the gospel. So he had compassion on them. He passed up an opportunity to rest, and he healed the sick, drove out demons, and taught the crowds for hours. Matthew tells us that this went on until evening. Jesus could not let anyone leave without receiving what they needed, because he cared for them.

Just as Jesus had compassion on those whom he loved, God still cares about us, too. We may be tempted to think that some of our problems are not big enough for God to care about. I mean, there are a lot of people praying to him constantly, and some prayers might be more important to him than

others, right? This is not the case at all. Because God is omniscient, he knows every prayer that is said to him, and because he is omnipotent, he has the power to answer every single one. We do not have to be afraid to take our cares to God; in his first epistle, Peter tells his readers, “Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” Whether you have a little cold or some life-threatening illness, you can pray to God about it. Whether you have a jammed finger or a broken bone, you can pray to God about it. Whether you’re praying for yourself or for someone else, you can pray to God about it. And every time, God will have compassion on you, and he will answer your prayers, because he does care for you. He speaks to us through his Word, saying, “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.” We have such a wonderful God! And his compassion doesn’t end there.

Matthew continues writing, “As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves food.” The disciples wanted Jesus to send the crowds back home, but not because they were sick of them or finally wanted some time to themselves. They had the peoples’ best interest in mind; they needed time to get back to the markets before they closed to buy something to eat. In this way, the disciples also cared for the crowds. But Jesus tested them and said “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” But the disciples tried using their earthly logic to approach this problem. Instead of looking to their Lord and God to provide, they only looked into what they currently had in their stock: Five loaves of bread and two fish. How could they feed over five thousand people with just these? If they split them evenly, many people would not even get crumbs! The disciples doubted that this could be done. They didn’t even consider Jesus, whom they had seen work miraculous things before.

So, Jesus took things into his hands: “Bring them here to me.” And after he gave thanks, he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples. And then he broke it again and gave it to them. And again. And again. The disciples took all the food that they were given and distributed it to the whole crowd.

And everyone there received far more than a few crumbs of food, or just enough to make it home that evening. Everyone sitting there that day, over five thousand men, women, and children, ate until they were satisfied. And not only that, but there were twelve basketfuls of bread and fish left over. This means that each disciple was able to take a basket with them to remind them of what their teacher could do.

Obviously, we don't hear about miracles like this happening today. But this does not mean that God is no longer providing for our needs. He does still provide for us, and not just spiritually through his word. God provides for our physical needs as well, as he provided for the crowds who came to him. Now, we may be tempted to ask ourselves, "How does this happen? God doesn't work all day to make money for my family so he can provide for them; that's what I do! God doesn't make trips to the grocery store every week so I can eat; I have to do that! God doesn't cover my expensive medical bills, I do!" It can be very easy to come to these conclusions when we use our earthly logic, just as the disciples did.

When we look only to ourselves to provide what we need for life, we neglect our savior, just as his disciples did when they tried to use human reasoning to feed thousands of people.

But Jesus forgave them and had mercy on them. He was capable of anything and in control of everything, and he provided a solution to the disciples' problem. We have that same Lord. God also has forgiven us and has had mercy on us. He is still capable of anything and in control of everything. We already know that he cares for us; Why, then, wouldn't he provide for us as well? He is the one who gave you the ability to work for your wages. He is the one who sent rain and sunshine on the earth to grow crops and nurture livestock so that they can sustain us in our lives. He is the one who blesses doctors who help people recover from their illnesses, and he blesses those in every other profession as well. Because of this, we have nothing to worry about. God has the very hairs on your head numbered, and not one of them falls off without his knowledge. We learn from earlier in Matthew's gospel, during Jesus' sermon on the mount, that God even provides for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field,

even though they don't work for it. How much more will he provide for us? Because of this we do not have to worry about our physical needs, because we are much more precious to God than birds or flowers.

However, when we were lost in our sinful ways, our spiritual needs far outweighed our physical needs. Our needs for food, water, or shelter paled in comparison to our need for salvation. Just as the disciples were unable to provide food for the five thousand, we are completely helpless to live lives that are pleasing to God. But God loves us, and cares for us, so much that he provided salvation for us. He sent his son Jesus to live the perfect life that we could not, and through his death and resurrection we have full forgiveness of sins. We no longer have to rely on the law for our salvation; we have it through faith in Christ, and we have the hope of heaven someday, where physical needs will no longer bother us.

Now, this does not mean that we should stop working or buying food. We can't expect God to send ravens to come and feed us, or that the oil and flour in our jars will never run out. But we know that even in times of trouble, God will provide for us. All we have to do is come to him in prayer and ask. God answers all prayers, he answers your prayers, and he will give you what you need, for your body or your soul. Thank God, for he is in control. We don't have to worry. Amen.