double or triple the number of men…10,000 or 15,000 (both are also nice, round numbers!). But even though the exact number may be uncertain, all four gospels make clear that this is a quality miracle, not a cut-rate parlor trick. The feeding of the 5,000 shows the profusion of God’s care for us, and God’s desire to give us nothing less than the bread of life.

This is a quality miracle because the feeding is a miracle of *abundance*. When a large crowd comes marching toward Jesus and the disciples, Jesus plays a little game with Philip. He asks him, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Philip panic and stammers, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little” (John 6:5-7). Philip knows the scarcity of their resources and feels the enormity of the need. He makes the same mistake that so many churches make, saying, “We don’t have the budget; we don’t have the staff; we don’t have the equipment or the time or the energy.” Another disciple, Andrew, does a little better, offering a possible solution: “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.” But then Andrew falls back into the scarcity mentality and sighs, “But what are they among so many people?” (vv. 8-9).

Jesus takes the loaves, gives thanks and distributes the bread and the fish to the people. They eat as much as they want, and everyone is completely satisfied (vv. 10-11). This is a quality miracle. A miracle of abundance. Then, to stress that there is much more in this meal than anyone could eat, Jesus has the disciples gather up the leftovers, and they fill 12 baskets. The people are so impressed that they begin to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (vv. 12-14). Feeding the 5,000 shows the abundance of God’s care for us.

Some of the feeding of hungry people will come from generous giving. And some will come from being better stewards of what we are given. “Our grandparents used to make a point of not throwing away leftover food,” said Pope Francis. “Consumerism has made us accustomed to wasting food daily, and we are unable to see its real value...Throwing away food is like stealing from the table of those who are poor and hungry.”

And he is right. Forty percent of all food in the United States is wasted at some point. We enjoy an enormous abundance of food in this country, but it is up to us to be good stewards of what we have, so that everyone will have enough to eat. Jesus performed his miracle of abundance so that everyone in the crowd would be fed. And then he had the disciples gather up the leftovers, so that nothing would be wasted.

Looking deeper, we see that the feeding of the 5,000 also reveals God’s desire to *give us the bread of life*. The quality of this miracle is seen in its abundance, but also in its gift of Jesus himself. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus says just a little later; “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry” (v. 35). Jesus wants to satisfy our physical hunger as well as our spiritual hunger.

The focus for Jesus is quality, not quantity. Feeding the whole person, body, and soul. Jesus is not just bread, he is the bread of life! The quality of this bread is revealed right after the feeding of the 5,000, when the disciples get into a boat and start traveling across the Sea of Galilee. The sea becomes rough because a strong wind is blowing, and they are rowing hard across water that is deep and deadly. Then they see Jesus, walking across the rough water, and he says to them, “It is I; do not be afraid” (vv. 16-21). On a dark and dangerous night, Jesus fills them with the gift of his presence and his power. Jesus offers us something beyond human capacity to achieve.

*The Crown* is a popular television series that tells the story of the British royal family. In one episode, Prince Philip is feeling lost in middle age. A former pilot, he is obsessed with the Apollo 11 mission and thrilled when the moon landing is a success. When the three astronauts visit Buckingham Palace after the mission, Philip asks them questions about their most profound insights from outer space. He is looking for inspiration.

But when he meets them, he discovers that they are just normal, young men who were simply doing their jobs on Apollo 11. It is a dramatic and devastating moment for Prince Philip, a moment largely invented for the television drama. What is historically accurate, however, is Prince Philip’s involvement in the creation of a retreat center called St. George’s House. Along with an Anglican priest, Prince Phillip made St. George’s a place where people could discuss religious and secular issues. Prince Philip would give talks on the role of clergy in society, stressing the importance of bringing together scientists and theologians to find common ground. Prince Philip discovered that inspiration cannot be found in human technology alone. People need the bread of life, even more than a man on the moon.

Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann maintains that God created a world of great abundance. Writing of Jesus as the bread of life, Bruggemann says: “When people forget that Jesus is the bread of the world, they start eating junk food - the food of the Pharisees and of Herod, the bread of moralism and of power. Too often the church forgets the true bread and is tempted by junk food. Our faith is not just about spiritual matters; it is about the transformation of the world. The closer we stay to Jesus, the more we will bring a new economy of abundance to the world.”

Jesus presents an entirely different kind of world, one infused with the mystery of abundance and a cross-shaped, sacrificial generosity. Five thousand are fed and 12 baskets of food are left over – one for every tribe of Israel. Jesus transforms the world by blessing it and breaking it beyond our narrow self-interest. The feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus’ walking on the water are both quality miracles. They show us the abundance of God’s care for us, the desire of God to give us the bread of life, and the promise that Jesus will be with us in the darkest and scariest moments of our lives. When it comes to miracles, 5,000 always communicates quality. In every time and place and situation, God wants to give us nothing but the best.

Prayer: Lord, the eyes of all look to You in hope; and You give them what they need. You open Your hand and satisfy the hunger and thirst of every living thing. We, too, turn to You again, longing to be filled — to eat of the Bread of Life, to drink from Your life-giving streams, to taste Your goodness and live. May the time we spend together in Your presence nourish our hearts and minds; may it strengthen our relationship with You; and renew our commitment to live in this world as Your faithful disciples. For You alone are God, the Source and Sustainer of life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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**A Quality Miracle**

Sunday, July 25, 2021 [John 6:1-21](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+6%3a1-21&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Studies show that people LOVE round numbers. According to *The Washington Post*, round numbers, such as 10, 50, or 100, offer more than precisely measured information; these figures are often filled with *emotion*. Research shows that “we love round numbers so much that we often regulate our behavior to achieve them.”

Need some proof? You check your fitness tracker and see that you walked 9,874 steps, so you walk around the house to get 126 more steps, because it feels good to reach 10,000 steps. At the checkout, the total comes to $27.53, and the cashier asks if you want to add $.47 to benefit St. Jude Children’s Hospital. You say “yes!” because you are a good person, but also, because it is extremely gratifying to see $28.00 on the ticket. When pumping gas, you squeeze a few more drops out of the pump until you get to a round-number total, because $39.67 is not nearly as satisfying as $40.00. At baseball practice you are batting an average of .298, so you put in some extra effort to reach .300. Your goal is to get 1200 on your SATs, so you take practice tests or hire a tutor to achieve your perfect score.

According to the research, round numbers appeal to us because they signify *quality*. Not quantity…*quality*. It is a strange phenomenon, but it is true. A $10 hamburger at restaurant somehow seems more tempting and delicious than one listed for $9.99. Round numbers on a restaurant menu send a message of quality, according to a *Management* *Science* study. Non-round numbers, on the other hand, are an indication of sub-standard fare. “That’s why you don’t see a Chanel bag for $4,999.99,” says Olga Shurchkov, a behavioral economist at Wellesley College. Something in our brain equates round numbers with quality.

All of which brings us to Jesus and the feeding of the 5,000. Notice that Jesus did not feed 4,997 people or 5,003 people on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. According to John, the crowd was “about five thousand in all” (6:10). It seems like John may be rounding out his figure here, and the exact number of diners is a little fuzzy. But all four gospels say the same thing: Matthew says that “those who ate were *about* five thousand men, besides women and children” (14:21). So, the total number of people could easily have been