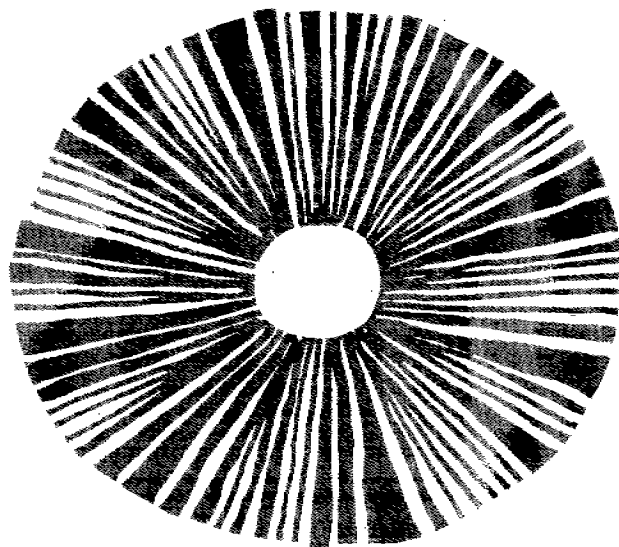




**“The United Thank Offering Story—
A Sermon by the Rev. Everett W. Francis”**

This brochure is a UTO publication from the 1970s. The sermon speaks about the “biblical UTO story”, the loaves and fishes. It draws parallels between the qualities of the United Thank Offering and this story at the heart of mission and ministry.



the people in the wilderness, and that something has happened throughout history as His disciples have gone out and distributed to those in need.

Actually, affirming, offering with Thanksgiving, and distributing involves faith. Not faith as belief in a set of propositions. But faith as going out and acting: doing something in trust. So often faith is nothing but self-confidence wherein we act on the basis of our proven human possibilities. Faith rather is going into the darkness expecting to meet the light. The father of the epileptic boy cried out, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief." These two statements are not contradictory. In fact, the father was saying, "I believe, I'm willing to try, I don't see how, help me God, you can." "I believe, help thou my unbelief." Faith that needs results is not faith. Faith that needs results is a challenging of God, trust and obedience and lacking, and the creature stands up to his Creator and commands Him to obey.

Lord, I believe—help thou my unbelief. Here's what I have to work with—affirm it. I offer it to you with Thanksgiving. I distribute it . . . I go forth into the future expectant, hopeful that you will use my gifts for others.

V

The Biblical thank offering story—as does today's United Thank Offering—poses three questions for us:

Do you believe that Jesus *in some way* satisfied the needs of the people in the wilderness? I do, I hope you do also.

Do you believe that *today* Jesus wants to satisfy the needs of His people? By "His people" I mean not just the members of your parish, of the Diocese, of the Church. I mean even more, "His people," are all his children—in and out—the poor, the rich, all races, all nations. I believe He does, I hope you do also.

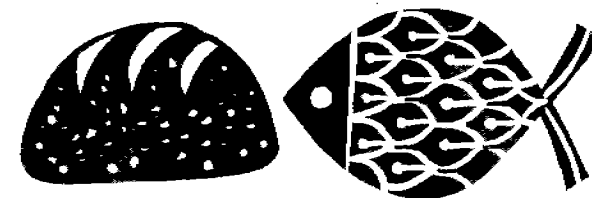
Do you believe that you are empowered to distribute Christ's blessings to the crowds today? I do. I hope you do also.

Make your own Biblical thank offering then: By affirming who and what and where you are; by offering yourself and your life to God with Thanksgiving; and by distributing yourself and your talents and treasures to those in your home, community, and world. Join in with others in the United Thank Offering to remind you of your own personal Biblical thank offering, and also to help Christ and His Church meet the needs of the multitudes of His people today.

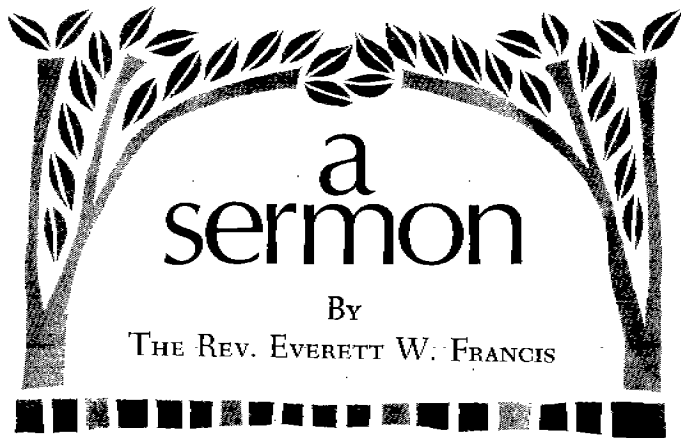


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"So Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down . . ."



a sermon

By
THE REV. EVERETT W. FRANCIS

The most appropriate United Thank Offering story is also one of the oldest stories. It is a story that was first transmitted by word of mouth. Later it was written down. Now it appears in our Bible. It is one of the few stories that appear in all four of the Gospels. The story was very important to early Christians. So important that they decorated their homes and meeting places with symbols from the story.

You know the story. One time Jesus was in the wilderness with 5,000 people—a multitude. The people were hungry. They had no food except the lunch of a boy: five loaves and two fishes.

“So Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples and the disciples to them that were set down.”

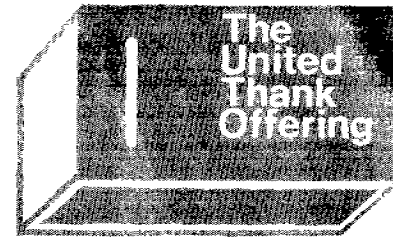
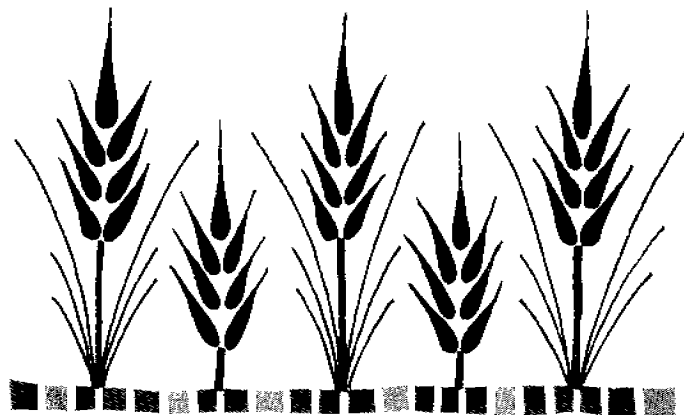
I

Let’s look first at the context of the early Church to see why it was remembered. We tend to idealize the early Church, when in reality it was a very ordinary—or below ordinary—group of people. They were the people of the land: the poor, the outcasts, the sinner—people who weren’t religiously or socially acceptable. The state mistrusted the Church. Many church leaders had a jail record. When they gathered together in times of discouragement, and that was most of the time, they said

to one another, “Remember the loaves and fishes! The same Lord, even now, is at work to change our meager resources, our bungling efforts into enough to do the job.” Then when they gathered in times of success: “See, the Lord still provides what is needed.” Through Christ’s power it is possible for us to meet the human needs about us.

II

Our minds of course wonder what happened back then. I don’t know. There are a number of answers given. One answer, of course, is that Jesus literally did multiply the loaves and fishes. Another attempt to answer what happened says that there was not a multiplication of loaves but a transformation of hearts. No Palestinian, this theory says, would go into the desert without food. The people had it hidden. The teaching of Jesus, the example of the little boy, and the faith of Jesus sharing with the people transformed their hearts, and they shared what they had. Another explanation is that the teaching and the fellowship were such, the reality of God’s presence was such that they had a sacramental meal, a little outward and visible sign of a real inward and spiritual feeding. Indeed, St. John, uses the occasion of this feeding to give his teaching on the Holy Communion.



III

In my opinion, however, I think we miss the point of the story if we spend much time on the manner in which the miracle occurred. The Gospel writers weren’t interested in *how* our Lord fed the multitude.

It’s been my privilege in the past ten years of my ministry to serve on the staff of the Presiding Bishop. I have seen new United Thank Offering projects from Ethete, Wyoming to Detroit, Michigan to Atlantic City, to Zululand, South Africa. God has used the United Thank Offering gifts to feed the multitudes, house the homeless, enlighten the ignorant, comfort the sick, restore the drop-out, and give hope to the despairing. Even today, God uses our meager resources to supply the needs of His people all over the world. Your nickels, dimes, and quarters do make the difference. They are producing miracles.

But, as I say, we miss the point of feeding in the wilderness, and we miss the point of the United Thank Offering, if we concentrate on the manner of the miracles, or how the multitude was fed or how the money is spent.

IV

It seems to me that the real point of the Biblical thank offering story, and the real point of the United Thank Offering is contained in these words of St. John: “So Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down.”

I find three actions in this text: *Affirmation—*

He took the loaves; *offering* and giving thanks to God; and *distributing* to others.

First there is an affirmation. Jesus affirms He has something—five loaves and two fishes. How often we make excuses for not acting because we don’t have this or that. God doesn’t ask us to use what we don’t have. He asks us to use and affirm what we do have. He knows what we have, He gave it to us. Affirm God’s gift to you. How can you ever have more, if you won’t affirm what you now have? And everyone of you has the necessary starting gift of God. Our responsibility is only with what we have. Affirm it.

Offer what you have with Thanksgiving to God. God knows what we have and don’t have. He knows our situation. He knows our parents and our children. He knows our home, our school, our community. God knows our work mates, our teachers, our neighbors, our civic officials. He knows our skills, our financial condition, our physical shape. Offer yourself to Him with Thanksgiving.

Distribute. That is act as if God’s promises were true. Go out in trust that God’s presence and power are with you to accomplish His purposes. Imagine how the disciples must have felt when Jesus gave them portions of the loaves and fishes and had them go out to feed the multitude. Again, I don’t know *how* the feeding took place, I do know that something happened to satisfy the real needs of

