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“You Feed Them”

Matthew 14:13-21

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Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand

So here's another one of those stories that we've all heard a thousand times. Even non-Christians have heard this one! The thing that makes this passage tricky for a pastor is the temptation to talk about the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. I mean, after all, that's always been the name of the story, hasn't it? It's the story of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000.

And so we romanticize it – 5,000 men, plus women and children, follow Jesus around longing for healing even at the expense of their next meal.

(What does that tell us?) While Jesus, at the last minute, swoops in like a super hero and saves the day, multiplying 5 small barley loaves and two pickled fish -- or smoked -- stunning the disciples and leaving the masses literally filled, not to mention all the leftovers – it's a miracle!

It's like when He turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana – whew! Thank God Jesus was here! Now we can drink some more! Now that's a miracle! But I think we're missing the point.

Sure I get it – what Jesus does here – it IS in all four gospels – is nothing short of a miracle. It IS wondrous. But I think we're overlooking something else that's in the story; something that may be more important than portraying Jesus as some sort of Dudley Do-Right arriving just in the nick of time to save the day! Something much more important...

One scholar points out that in the 21st c. we might enjoy the debate over whether Jesus 'magically' turned a meager lunch into a meal for 5,000 or more, or if the very act of sharing got people to just share what they'd already brought with them; but this was not the concern of the early Christians – the people Matthew was writing for...

Matthew told us in the first chapter that Jesus is Emmanuel which means ... “God with us.” The God who created the universe out of nothing and separated light from darkness should have no problem multiplying some bread and fish, right? Jesus wasn’t the only one living in the first century that people claimed was doing miracles, working wonders, or even being called ‘Messiah.’ Jesus wasn’t even the only guy in town calling himself the son of God. Most of the emperors did that.

Jesus and the early Christians never imagined that stories about wondrous acts would convince people that Jesus was divine. You’ve probably heard these works being referred to as ‘signs.’

All miracles are signs, but not all signs are miracles.

A 'miracle' is not repeatable in Nature. A miracle is defined as: "An event that is contrary to the established laws of nature and attributed to a supernatural cause..."

A 'sign' is a miracle that can strengthen a person's faith, be prophetic, and be something that points you to God; a sign can be deliberately ignored.

The wonders Jesus performed were signs demonstrating the character of God. Which brings me to what I think is the real point of the story, which is not what Jesus does, but why. You see, the character of the God that Jesus is here to reveal and represent is captured in a single word: compassion -- the sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.

Matthew says that when Jesus saw the crowd He had compassion for them. He healed their sick, he tended their needs, he did what they try to teach in pastoral care class – he was present for them – really present. And when evening rolled around and they got hungry and found themselves with nothing to eat, he made sure they ate.

Have you ever noticed how much food and sharing of food there is in the scriptures?

Before we move on, let’s have a look at the context of the scene – where they are and where they’ve been. The story opens with the phrase, “Now when Jesus heard this he withdrew by boat to a deserted place.” The thing Jesus had just heard was that King Herod had, after a sumptuous feast, just executed Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptizer. Scholars point out the irony and the power of the placement of this scene. Here, Matthew takes us from Herod’s banquet – feeding those who don’t need to be fed -- a scene out of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Shameless,” immediately to the complete opposite; a scene portraying the masses of poor, hungry, and sick crowds desperate for relief. It’s like switching channels from the Kardashians to a report about

orphan refugees at the border. According to Matthew, THIS is the kind of God that is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Remember, back in the first century, in Greek and Roman societies Gods were not supposed to care about people – especially people like these – these needy, hungry people... The gods of the ancient philosophers were called by names like “Unmoved mover,” and “First Cause.” At the other end of the spectrum the Gods of the Roman and Greek mythology (although it wasn’t ‘mythology’ to them) seemed to use humans as playthings and servants – here to satisfy their every whim. These Gods generally could be expected to stand by the rich and powerful – people like Herod and his well-fed guests, they were not known for siding with the oppressed, the hungry, the down-trodden, or even the ordinary.

Jesus fulfills the ancient law – it’s what he came to do, right? Jesus fulfills the ancient call of the God of Israel for us to feed the hungry. And that’s what happens here. Which is no small feat by the way. What we have come to call ‘food scarcity’ wasn’t only known in the ancient world, it was rampant. Not knowing where your next meal was coming from, or even if you would have a next meal, was a regular part of everyday life.

The disciples’ suggestion that these hoards of poor hungry people should just go buy some dinner is not only unrealistic – out there in a deserted place -- it’s ridiculous! It’s Marie Antoinette saying “Let them eat cake!” It’s kind of insulting when you think that these people wouldn’t have any money to buy food anyway, whether they were out listening to Jesus or not. So Jesus tells his disciples to get over themselves and feed the crowd!

Which brings me to a second miracle in this story... Jesus uses the disciples to tend to the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children even when the disciples would rather be focusing on themselves. With a few words and actions that actually foreshadow the last supper, Matthew takes the disciples - -and us -- from an attitude of scarcity to one of gratitude and abundance – from “we have nothing here but five loaves and two fishes,” to “Thank you, God, for these loaves and fishes.” And the disciples get swept up in it! Regardless of their skepticism or doubt and their self-preoccupation, the disciples find themselves caught up in the miracle of transforming a situation of scarcity into one of abundance. It wasn’t just that everyone got a bite to eat. It doesn’t just say, “All ate.” No – it says, “All ate and were filled.” And at the risk of repeating myself, there were leftovers! There was an abundance.

You see Jesus tells the disciples to do it. “You feed them,” he says. He takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it, and gives it back to them! In other words, God takes the resources that we

have, blesses them, gives them back to us, and says to us, in no uncertain terms, “You feed them.”

And when we as God’s reluctant disciples get caught up in it, it’s a sign! It’s a sign that God loves people – especially those that are most vulnerable – the poor, the sick, the orphans, the marginalized. And God continues the miracle by using us to minister to them. And it is a miracle if God can actually get us to do it!

In this story we have a 3-fold challenge: 1) It’s a challenge to our own heartlessness and failure to give of ourselves to others, even when it hurts. It’s a sign of the vision that we are called to not only embrace, but to embody. 2) It’s a challenge to turn away from the Herod-like quest for power and plenty, disregarding the suffering of others. And finally, it is a challenge to offer what resources we have – time, expertise, friendship, creativity, compassion, and – oh, yeah – money! We are challenged to turn our meager resources over to Jesus so he can bless them and break them (!) and give them back to us, so we can redistribute them to those who need them.

[CCUMC] And today is the perfect day for me to remind you that as you take communion today you are participating in a miracle. Jesus breaks the bread and serves it to us. What then? We who are served and partake in God’s heavenly food are to go and do likewise. And Jesus is the bread – You feed them. Amen.