

“All Ate and Were Filled” by Dr. Katelyn Brackney

Sermon for Meadowbrook Congregational Church

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Matthew 14:13-21 : Feeding the Five Thousand

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then 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. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Today’s gospel reading is the only miracle story that can be found in all four gospels, though they each include slightly different details. But before we begin to dig into the story, I think it is important to understand the backdrop this story sits against. Matthew 14:13-21 takes us to the seaside in the midst of some pretty awful circumstances. You may have noticed that the start of our text begins with “...when Jesus had heard this...” But unless you have read the previous several verses you don’t know what it is that he heard. And that context of what he has heard makes a difference as we reflect on the actions of Jesus.

In the first part of Matthew 14 we see that John, Jesus’ life-long companion and fellow proclaimer of good news, has been beheaded by Herod. Upon hearing this news, Jesus, we can assume, is devastated and seeks some peace and space to process this loss. He heads to a boat and makes his way to a “deserted place,” but

before he has even gotten there people have heard of his whereabouts and follow him, though on foot, and when he arrives at shore there is already a large crowd gathered.

Upon seeing this crowd, instead of being annoyed that he isn't getting the quiet time he had, perhaps, been hoping for, he sees this large gathering of people and has compassion on them. Depending on which Gospel you are reading, you may hear this portion with Jesus truly being alone, or it may share that his disciples were with him on the boat. Either way, once ashore, Jesus saw those who were sick and began to heal them, and this healing process and, I'm sure, his meandering through the crowd, talking with with, takes quite some time. The crowd is said, after all, to have "5,000 men BESIDES¹ women and children. So we're talking about maybe around 20,000 people gathered together. If you've been to a Pistons or Red Wings game, that's about how many people you can fit inside Little Ceasar's Arena...that's a LOT of people.

After quite some time, the disciples approach Jesus and share their concern for the crowd as the hour was getting late, they were in a remote place, and people need to eat. We all know how we can get when we're hungry, we don't need a hangry crowd on our hands! So they tell Jesus that he should send these folks on their way to the surrounding towns to get food. But Jesus replies "They need not go away; *you* give them something to eat."² Now, an important note here is that, yes, Jesus is telling them to feed the crowd, but the subtext of this statement must be noted. Remember, Jesus is mourning the loss of John, AND, during this time in history there were often food shortages and the Roman Empire capitalized on this. One commentary shares that

¹ Capitalization added for emphasis

² Italicization added for emphasis

“Localized food shortages were common within the Roman Empire, and officials knew the political value of grain giveaways and circulating propaganda that trumpeted Rome’s ability to feed its people. Someone who’s able to feed the masses in a desolate place can give hope to the masses who reside in the empire’s periphery.”³

Perhaps Jesus fed the people because he is God and wants to provide for his creation, but perhaps there is also a bit of “stick it to ‘em” in his actions as he seeks to provide what these people need in a way that is 1) free, and 2) is stating through action that there is abundance, there is enough, for all without greed playing a part, and that “enough” is going to come from him, from God, not from Empire.

But no matter Jesus’ intent in his request, the disciples reply saying all they have is 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Whether they collected this from a small boy like it is recorded in John, from among the crowd or themselves, like in the other gospels, somehow there are 5 loaves and 2 fish. Not a lot when you have such a large crowd, let alone a small group. Yet, Jesus takes this meager offering, a meal of peasants, or “daily bread,” if you will, and blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples to share among the crowd; and somehow, there is enough for all to be filled.

By the time everyone has eaten and had their fill, there are 12 baskets of leftovers. One commentary I read said, for the size of the crowd, that this would really be the equivalent to having one package of hot dogs left after a family reunion.⁴ So yes, while there was plenty for everyone, there also was no greed keeping anyone from having enough. This would have been in contrast to the banquet Herod threw in light of John’s execution, as well.

³ [Working Preacher Commentary](#)

⁴ *Interpretation Commentary on Matthew*, Douglas R.A. Hare, p.167

So here we find ourselves, with Jesus and the disciples, and thousands of people, in a remote place, seated in the grass, with full bellies, having received their daily bread. And it isn't "my" daily bread or "your" daily bread, but "our" daily bread that is received.⁵ *It is enough bread for today, and enough bread for all.*

And maybe that's why the disciples were defaulting to sending the crowd on their way in order to find food...feeding people isn't flashy. It's a daily task. In their minds, perhaps, hunger comes back, unlike, say, a healed illness. Feeding a crowd isn't necessarily exciting. And I can imagine it would be both logistically more simple to send folks to get their own food, but also less work on the part of the disciples.

But remember, when Jesus first laid eyes on this crowd he had compassion for them. And that is what Jesus is teaching the disciples here, too. "Jesus is telling the disciples that their role is to have compassion on the people, healing *and*⁶ feeding them—not sending them away....the role and the responsibility of the disciples in the feeding of the people is lifted up by Matthew. It is they who distribute the bread that Jesus has blessed and broken. Followers of Jesus must learn the compassion of Jesus."⁷ And live it out.

And that's the lesson in here for us, too. Or at least one of them. Jesus, in the midst of his grief, is filled with compassion, he chooses to provide healing and sustenance, abundant life and daily bread, in the midst of an Empire that sought to take life in various ways. Jesus is the host of a meal that always supplies enough, and it is the job of the disciples, and our job today, to pass out the bread and the fish— "be God's instruments in meeting the needs of others."⁸ This is who God is, and who we are called to be.

⁵ *Belief Commentary on Matthew*, Anna Case-Winters, p.191

⁶ Italicization added for emphasis

⁷ *Belief*, p.192

⁸ *Interpretation*, p.167

The last few weeks as we've explored themes about the kingdom of heaven, I've used the language of partnering with God to bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. And each week we recite the Lord's Prayer and we say together "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread..." And yes, God is the main character in bringing the "on earth as it is in heaven" and giving us our daily bread, or enough bread for today, but God has also invites us to join in that work. A quote often attributed to Pope Francis says, "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. This is how prayer works." We say the prayer, and then we get to work passing out the loaves and the fish.

As I wrap up I want to share one quick story I heard on a podcast this week that I think embodies this really beautifully, and perhaps will challenge us to consider the ways our can embody this living out of bringing the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven, and joining in the sharing of daily bread. There is a church I recently heard of that has a food pantry in their building that is open on a particular days each month, but instead of having all the food items stored in a cabinet or squirrelled away in a back room, each time they open up their doors for folks to come get food, they have the pantry items set on the communion table as a symbol of the welcome, hospitality, and sustenance of Christ lived out in the world. When they come to get their meal, their daily bread, they do so, essentially, as an act of communion. I'm not saying we have to do this exactly, but I do think it can help get our own gears turning on the different ways we can embody Christ as host and sustainer.

May it be so. Amen.