

The Miracle of Sharing

3rd Sunday after Pentecost – June 20, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³Now 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 men, besides women and children.

This is the third week in our series, “Kids’ Stories All Grown Up.” Today, we take a grown-up look at the story of Jesus’ miraculous feeding of thousands.

A Simple Story

It isn’t hard to understand why children like this story. It is simple and easy to visualize. A huge and hungry crowd is gathered on a Galilean hillside. Having only five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus blesses and miraculously multiplies the food so it is sufficient to feed perhaps 20,000 people with food left over! (Note – though the story is often referred to as the “feeding of the five thousand,” the figure refers only to the men in the crowd, so 20,000 is a reasonable estimate.)

But children are not the only ones to have treasured this story. Of all the miracles recounted in the gospels, this is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels! In fact, there are two more accounts of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands. As we’d expect, each gospel writer tells the story a little differently. John tells us that a boy brought forward the few loaves and fishes. More than the others, John’s telling of the meal evokes memories of the Exodus and of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. Mark has more detail and emphasizes Jesus’ compassion. More explicitly than the others, Luke ties together the disciples’ mission to build the kingdom and the power of Jesus’ work with the crowds. This is how it is with the gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John may all work with the same material, but each use it to paint a distinctive portrait of Jesus.

Matthew’s story

So, what is the attraction of this particular miracle? Why, of all the miracles Jesus performed during his public ministry, is this the only one preserved by all the gospel writers? Yes, it is spectacular, but no more so than Jesus’ resuscitation of Lazarus after he had been dead four days. There were other large crowds that witnessed Jesus’ miracles, though probably few as large as 20,000. Perhaps



The Loaves and Fish

Last year at this time, we were in the midst of a sermon series on the symbols in the Rose Window. The symbol of the loaves and fishes serves to remind us of Jesus’ power and that he is the “bread of life.” It also reminds us that each day God provides for our most basic needs. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer we ask God for our daily bread. But, perhaps most importantly, this symbol reminds us of our own responsibility to do all we can to multiply the people of God. We are to be the light to the world so that others may see our good works and give glory to God (Matt 5:16).

At St. Andrew, we begin our multiplication by inviting people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another. We extend our multiplication through mission projects like Nuevo Laredo and in the loving witness we carry into the communities in which we live and work.

Matthew's simple account will help us understand the significance to the gospel writers of this particular story.

After the execution of his cousin John (see the "Two Banquets" text box), Jesus goes off to be alone, even resorting to the use of a boat. But, of course, the crowds track him down and gather around him as soon as he sets foot on shore. Jesus is not upset with the crowds who press in on him; rather, he has compassion for them and cures their sick. Late in the day, the disciples come to Jesus, pointing out that they are out in the middle of nowhere and it is time for everyone to head off and find something to eat in the nearby villages. But Jesus says no; everyone can stay. Though only five loaves of bread and two fish can be found, Jesus looks to heaven, blesses the food, hands it to his disciples . . . and Jesus is not referred to again in this story. Perhaps the significance of this miracle story lies here.

Two Banquets

A key to reading the Bible well is to always look for the context. Put the verse in the paragraph, the paragraph in the immediate story, and then put the story in the context of the stories around it. For example, Matthew puts two banquet stories side-by-side: Herod's banquet (Matthew 14:1-12) and the feeding of the thousands (14:13-21). Herod's banquet ends in death; Jesus' banquet ends in abundance.

John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. Herod had arrested John and thrown him in prison to shut him up, for John had condemned Herod's incestuous relationship with Herodias, his niece and his brother's wife. (What a family tree that must have been!)

Herod wants John dead but fears the consequences of an execution. He knows that John the Baptist enjoys popular support. However, on Herod's birthday, there is a huge banquet. Herodias' daughter dances for the king and Herod is so taken with her (yes, we are supposed to grasp the decadence in all this!) that he grants her a wish, any wish. The girl asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter . . . and Herod delivers. After Jesus' disciples claim John's body and bury it, Jesus withdraws to a boat to be alone.

By putting these stories side-by-side, Matthew draws a stark contrast between the rotten empire of Caesar and the life-giving empire of Christ. Caesar and all his minions, like Herod, may believe and proclaim that Caesar is Lord, but it is a lie. There is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, and only one kingdom, God's. Caesar may have the power to kill John the Baptist, but it is a power that destroys, not creates. Jesus, the true Lord and Savior, has the power to create where there was nothing. In Caesar, lies death. In Christ, lies life.

It is Jesus who takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and multiplies it . . . but it is the disciples who actually distribute the food, feed the crowds, and collect the leftovers. Jesus is the power behind the feeding, but the disciples are the ones who do the work. Jesus *doesn't* wave a magic wand over the crowd so that food might appear in everyone's lap or so that the hungry tummies will be magically full. This is why the miraculous feeding is in all four gospels . . . the entire miracle story is a metaphor for how Jesus will work. Jesus' work will be done by others, during his ministry and after his death. Jesus is teaching his disciples what his ministry is all about. He doesn't just tell them, he shows them. The work of building God's kingdom will be done through the disciples, then and now.

Sharing the miracle

From God's choosing of Abraham to the feeding of the thousands to the youth mission trip to Nuevo Laredo, it has always been this way. God is not a god-of-the-magic-wand. God's purposes are worked out through us, not despite us. Jesus reminds his disciples that *they* are to be the light of the world. He sends *them* out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Luke 9:2). He shows his disciples how this works by handing them the loaves and having them distribute the food. If the crowds are going to get fed, the disciples are going to have to do it. They can't sit around hoping and praying that Jesus will do it for them. The disciples know whose power is at work, but they are also learning that their own hands better get busy.

Why is it this way? Why doesn't God simply wave a wand? *Because* God is love and we have been created so that we might love God and one another. This love is not mere sentiment or feeling, this love is carried in our compassion, our caring, our service, and our sacrifice. Just as Jesus' disciples learned what love is on that late afternoon, so 150 of our youth just spent a week learning to recognize the face of true love – such is the miracle of sharing.

Daily Bible Readings

(the other five gospel accounts of a miraculous feeding)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Mark 6:32-44 Mark's account of the feeding of the five thousand</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 9:10b-17 Luke's account – how does it differ from Matthew and Mark?</p>
<p>Day 3 John 6:1-15 John's account. What is distinctive here?</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 15:32-39 Feeding 4,000 men and their families</p>
<p>Day 5 Mark 8:1-10 Mark's account of the "feeding of the 4,000"</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

The second “Fruit of the Spirit” evening lecture, *Love*, will be this Tuesday, June 22, at 7pm in Piro Hall with Scott Engle.

What does a disciple of Jesus look like? How can you spot those who live in God’s way and walk by his Spirit? Surely this has nothing to do with our physical appearance or where we live. In a letter to the house churches in Galatia, the apostle Paul offered them a list of nine virtues that characterize the activities and attitudes of those who are led by God’s Spirit. God produces such fruit in all God’s people; not overnight but over time as God works within us and with us.

Please join us for these nine evenings (or at least as many as you can!) as we learn more about each fruit and its meaning for our lives and discipleship. There will be many surprises along the way. The biblical understandings of these fruit often differs a good bit from the secular world in which we live and work.

St. Andrew Bible Academy audio courses are now in-stock in the bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. One of Jesus’ recurrent themes is to summon his followers to be his helpers and associates. Sometimes Jesus is content to let his followers remain loyal at a distance (like Martha and Mary) but he would challenge others to sell all they had, even leaving behind family. Jesus’ summons his followers to assist in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. This proclamation is not only spoken, it is also performed. The hard work of 150 of our youth in Nuevo Laredo enacts the reality of God’s kingdom. We may have to take up our own cross, but there is work to do and none of us can simply go along for the ride. What are the barriers to our responding with joy to Jesus’ summons? What did we do yesterday? Today? What will we do tomorrow? What are our priorities? How are we living out the miracle of sharing?
2. In the first centuries after Jesus, Christians stopped using the Greek word *proskyneo* for worship because it was also used by pagans in reference to the worship of their gods. Instead, when referring to their own worshiping of the one true God, Christians came to use the Greek word for serving, *latreou*. How might our attitudes about service change if we see our service as an act of worship? How might our service acts themselves be changed? Why are so many of us reluctant to serve? Might this reluctance be overcome if we see service as an act of true worship?