

## Food and Multiplication

Matthew 14:13-21

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*When Jesus got the news, he slipped away by boat to an out-of-the-way place by himself. But unsuccessfully - someone saw him and the word got around. Soon a lot of people from the nearby villages walked around the lake to where he was. When he saw them coming, he was overcome with pity and healed their sick. Toward evening the disciples approached him. "We're out in the country and it's getting late. Dismiss the people so they can go to the villages and get some supper."*

*But Jesus said, "There is no need to dismiss them. You give them supper." "All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish," they said. Jesus said, "Bring them here." Then he had the people sit on the grass. He took the five loaves and two fish, lifted his face to heaven in prayer, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to the disciples. The disciples then gave the food to the people. They all ate their fill. They gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. About five thousand were fed besides women and children.*

Matthew 14:13-21 The Message

This week, our reading centers around Jesus's multiplication of the loaves and fishes — the only Jesus story that appears six times across the four gospels. Clearly, this event meant a lot to the early church. But what can it mean to us, here, now, in the 21st century?

In its original setting, I can easily imagine how Jesus' actions would have resonated with the crowds who flocked around him. They were colonized peasants. Overworked, underpaid, and malnourished. They knew the agony of an empty table. The agony of watching their children cry for bread.

But me? Not so much. I've never been hungry like that. I've never had to wait more than a few hours for a meal. So where is the resonance — the challenge, the indictment, the power — of this miracle for me?

Let's start with the context of this story. Our text begins, "Now when Jesus got the news" or other translation – "When Jesus heard this..." Heard what? When Jesus heard that his cousin, John the Baptist, who had been in prison, had just been beheaded, and his head delivered to Herod on a platter in the middle of an extravagant and vulgar dinner party – when he had heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place.

And who wouldn't? What else in the world is there to do? The utter horror and shock; the terrible helplessness and loss. This can't be undone.

John is gone, his cousin, his friend, the one who knew who Jesus was from before he was born – leaping in recognition in his mother Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of pregnant Mary’s voice, the one who declared the news in the wilderness that the Messiah is coming, and plunged God incarnate under the waters of baptism, the one whose whole life was about proclaiming God’s reign had come and announcing that Jesus had arrived, this John has just died a pointless, disgusting, inexplicable death, as a pawn in a gluttonous game of revenge and power.

Jesus withdraws to a deserted place. Who could blame him? He has every right to *absolutely lose it*. To tell them all to go away. To tell the disciples to make them leave him alone. To turn the boat around and float alone in the waves for hours until he regains his composure, until he has some peace and quiet. But crowds go to find him.

When Jesus sees the crowd, it says, he has compassion on them, and cures their sick. He brings the boat ashore and goes to them and stays there with them, each one. *What’s your name? What do you need? How can I help? I see you. God sees you. Be healed. Go and be well. You are set free. Find new life, my friend. How long have you struggled with this? It ends today. Peace to you.* He multiplies compassion and offers it to one person at a time.

As the day stretches toward night the disciples start getting worried – I imagine as much about Jesus as about the hungry crowds without a port-o-potty or food trucks for miles around, so they tell Jesus to send the crowds away so they can find food for themselves in the villages. A sound piece of advice. But Jesus answers, *They need not go away - you feed them.*

Those words have stuck with me this week. You feed them. The disciples looked at the little food available and only saw scarcity. They must have thought – when you have almost zero food, how can we feed them? How could we multiply it? How could the disciples do that? What does it mean for us?

Maybe it starts with food. How do we see food?

Part of food is health – what we eat, where it comes from, and access to good food.

My mom was a dietician. Everything in moderation. Joy of cooking. Sharing meals. Food was about nutrition and having more than enough to share around the table. Food had to do with relationships in the family and community. We belong to each other.

Food is part of the economy – where you buy food, cost of production, workers in grocery stores and restaurants, having money to grow food or buy or barter for food.

Jeffrey’s family owned a deli and bakery in Piedmont, WV. He has told me about how hard they worked. The deli was a gathering place. His grandfather often gave people food if they could not afford it. He kept a running tab, but was not too concerned about following up with them to pay it off. Food was regularly bought and sold – rolls, pies, cakes, candy, deli meats.

Food is meant to be shared in the midst of relationships and joys and struggles of daily life. Food is multiplied in a community that cares for each other.

How do you see food?

When Jesus fed the multitudes, people sat down together, taking only what they needed so that everyone got enough. The point was not to clamor for more. The point, very simply, was to enjoy the gift of a single day's portion in the company of others.

But when Jesus fed the multitudes, he was also acknowledging what we so often try to forget: that we are physical beings, with legitimate physical needs. We're not airy spirits; we have bodies, and those bodies themselves are gifts from God. Gifts worthy of honor and care.

Jesus was able to perform the miracle he did precisely because he took basic human need so seriously. When his disciples looked at the crowds, they saw only their own insufficiency. Their own scant resources. The impossibility of the situation.

But Jesus allowed himself to see genuine need, and he allowed that need to hit him squarely in his own gut. In the face of the crowd's deep hunger, despair couldn't be an option; someone had to act. Maybe it's only when we get in touch with our own deepest needs — for nourishment, for companionship, for help, for love, for holy mystery — that we can extend a generous gifts of food to others.

The crowds ate and were satisfied. Earlier they had experienced Jesus' teaching. I believe they were being transformed by his words, his healing, his love. They had been spiritually fed, healed in body and spirit. And they were fed in body. Both/and

As a church we are called to live into this place of incarnate love. People are hungry for meaning, for hope, for food for the journey. The church is a community where we are fed, transformed and then feed others.

On that hillside, the power that brought the world into being, is there, among them, healing the sick, and providing their bread for today, until all, every single one of them, to the last man, woman, and child, is fed until full, and there are leftovers galore. Food enough for all. An impromptu feast that in every way threatens the powers that be, uncontrolled, unrestricted, unearned and unexpected. That night all receive and are fed.

Today in our community people are hungry. But what can we do about that and the sadness, the injustice and the hopelessness? What can we do? Nothing. And also everything.

We could go away, bury our heads in the sand of a deserted place, and wish these things didn't happen. Or we could watch Jesus join the people, moved with compassion, and we

could join him, listening to the needs around us and within us, receiving the meal he offers and reaching out and sharing that gift with others in real and concrete ways.

Today we will pack the food for the Thanksgiving bags for the Ritter Center. Food is multiplied because multiple organizations collect food for Thanksgiving bags. It will mean people and families who are struggling will have food for a Thanksgiving meal and more. They will not go hungry. Ritter Center provides wholistic help and hope to people. Feeding them, guiding them, giving them tools for a more stable life.

Our partnership with the Ritter Center matters and reflects our larger vision of who God call us to be. We practice creating a world where people have enough food to eat.

As a community of faith, we know there is a feast more abundant than the most lavish and excessive meals of the empire, a different kind of meal. Instead of gluttony, it grows generosity, instead of greed, it invites all to freely give. And instead of playing people against each other, it brings all people together and reminds us that we are one, that we belong to each other and that we belong to God. Amen.