

Proper 13 A
Matthew 14:13-21
August 6, 2023

YOU Feed them!
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

¹³Now Jesus 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.

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The children at the Vacation Bible School of a small church were lined up in the fellowship hall for the evening snack. At the head of the table was a large tray of bread slices. There was a sign posted by the bread that read, “Take only one slice. God is watching.”

Further along the food line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. One child whispered to another, “Take all you want. God is watching the bread.”

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Oh, to be a guest at a meal hosted by Jesus! No food shortages, no beverage shortages, no shortages of any kind! Just bread and fish, as much as you can eat...sounds great doesn't it?! But seriously, twenty thousand people to feed and still twelve bushels of leftovers! That's a miracle in and of itself! In fact, the way I see it, this hillside feeding is a combination of three separate miracles and I think it's worth taking a look at each one.

The first miracle: twenty thousand people ate their fill and there were twelve baskets of leftovers. I don't know about you, but I've seen Midwesterners eat! If the folks in this story were anything like us, collecting twelve baskets of leftovers really is a miracle!

The second miracle: Jesus started out with five loaves and two small fish and a huge crowd went home stuffed. Enough said.

The third miracle, and this is really the one I want to focus on this morning:

Jesus uses the disciples, even when they would rather look after themselves, to tend the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children. Using words and actions foreshadowing the Last Supper, Matthew depicts what happens when you move from a worldview of scarcity – ‘we have nothing here but five loaves and fishes’ – to one of abundance – “thank you, God, for these five loaves and fishes.” Whatever their initial skepticism, or doubt, or self-preoccupation, the disciples are caught up in Jesus' words of abundance and gratitude and distribute what they have and participate in the wonder and joy that “all ate and were filled.”¹

The truth is, I think the reluctant, skeptical, self-absorbed disciples in this story, are a lot like us, sometimes. This is the part where my interpretation of this story may start to make us squirm a bit!

¹ David Lose. “The Real Miracles of the Story,” Davidlosenet, July 28, 2014: <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-8a-the-real-miracles/>.

When we focus our reading entirely on Jesus – on his blessing of the small amount of food, on the subsequent feeding of a hungry throng, even on collecting twelve bushels of leftovers, the story leaves us with awe, with wonder, even with gratitude. However, this story, like so many other wonderful Bible stories, is meant to move us to action.

Speaking about miracles, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, eminent preacher and author states that “Miracles, let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, do it all.” But that’s not what happened in today’s reading. Jesus tells the reluctant, skeptical, self-absorbed disciples, tells us, to get over our hang ups and give the people something to eat.

“A miracle,” says Rabbi Evan Moffic, “happens when the veil behind which God is hidden is lifted and our perspective changes. A miracle happens when God works through our hands and our hearts.”² That sounds like at least some of what happened in today’s reading. The crowd was hungry. Jesus told the disciples to feed them. The disciples handed Jesus five loaves and two fish. Jesus blessed it. The disciples distributed it to the multitude and then collected twelve baskets of leftovers.

And, the truth is, that miracle continues. Writing on this text, one of my seminary professors, David Lose, states that:

When a college-grad eschews a high-paying job in order to teach disadvantaged kids, [the] miracles continue. When a parent puts dreams of an academic career to the side to care for a special-needs child, [the divine] is working that same kind of miracle. When a church makes the wrenchingly difficult decision to celebrate its century of faithful service and close its doors after significant decline in order that another ministry might flourish, miracles abound. When one student stands up against bullies in defense of another student, [Holy] compassion is again miraculously revealed.

² Evan Moffic. “Do You Believe in Miracles?” Beliefnet.com:
<http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/truthsyoucanuse/2013/02/do-you-believe-in-miracles.html>.

When a fledgling community of faith makes a promise that no one that comes to its doors will be turned away hungry, [heaven] is still at work performing miracles through disciples eager, reluctant, and everything in between.³

In a way, this story sums up what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus, a true Christian. This story is an invitation, no, it's more of an order, to get involved – to act, because discipleship isn't just about following Jesus, or hearing his words, or even believing in what he says. Discipleship is about participating in the healing, feeding, community-building, peace-making, earth-changing work of the divine in the world.

So, the invitation to us this day is a simple one: not to just pray for a miracle to feed the hungry woman on the corner, or to house the many camping in front of the library, or to change the hearts and minds of elected officials and world leaders, or to clean up the earth – the invitation is for *us* to do something about it.

What miracle is the spirit inviting you to participate in today? As Gandhi says, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Or, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead.”

May it be so with us today. Amen.

³ David Lose. “The Real Miracles of the Story,” Davidlosenet, July 28, 2014: <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-8a-the-real-miracles/>.