

Matthew 14:13-21 "Spiritual Food"

The gospel for today is an old favorite story about Jesus and his disciples that was told over and over again. There are other such old favorite stories which are told only one time in the gospels.... such as the Good Samaritan, told only once; the story of the Prodigal Son, told only once; the story of the Sheep and the Goats, told only once. These are favorite, great stories but they are told only once in our Gospel.

But the story for today, about the five loaves and two fish, is not told merely once, not twice, not three times, but four times in its variations. It is the *only* Gospel miracle which is told *in its fullness* in *all* four Gospels.

Now, why is this story told over and over again? I believe it is because this story captures the truth, the essence of all the people involved; the essential truth about Jesus *and* the essential truth about the disciples *and* the essential truth about God.

So I would like to retell this story for you, but include elements from the other Gospel versions of the story, and then two more Bible stories that are connected.

It was springtime in Israel. The rains of March and April had come and the land was now fresh and green. The brown hills had soaked up the spring rains and the flowers were blooming and the hills were green again.

It was Passover time in Israel. Passover was their great religious feast, like Easter is for us. That meant a holiday from school, and a holiday from work. That meant that people were taking trips, packing their donkeys and going on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It was a time of religious aliveness, of fasting and feasting and traveling.

It was a good time for Jesus. Jesus had healed people of their diseases and his popularity was becoming enormous. He was like a

new rock star, and thousands would gather to hear him preach just as thousands gather at SPAC to hear a rock concert and see a star in person.

But it was also tragedy time in Israel. According to the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist had just been beheaded. John was the greatest moral force, the greatest spiritual force, the greatest prophet the land of Israel had experienced for four hundred years. He was the person that everyone looked to for moral and religious inspiration, and he was just beheaded by King Herod. Everyone was stunned by this tragedy, by this enormous loss, including Jesus, who had been baptized by John.

And so it was grieving time in Israel. People were stunned, and Jesus wanted to get away by himself to grieve, to pray, to remember. He wanted to get away to a lonely place and so he got into a boat to sail across Lake Galilee to a remote point, some four miles away, in order to get away from the massive crowds who were following him, to be alone.

And yet, the crowds followed him, walking the long, dusty, way around the lake.

And what was Jesus' reaction to the thousands who had shown up? Irritated? Angry? Imposed upon? No, he looked on the massive crowd with compassion, like they were sheep without a shepherd, like people who were in need of spiritual feeding for their spiritual hungers. And so he taught them and he healed them.

The day quickly passed. It got to be later, long into the day, and one of the disciples said: "Lord, the hour is late and the people don't have any food and we are a long way from any villages. Maybe you should send them home." And Jesus said to Philip, (according to John's version of the story), "How are we going to buy bread, so that people can eat?" Jesus said this *in order to test* Philip. Philip replied, "It would take more than two hundred

denari, more than two hundred days of wages, and even that wouldn't be enough bread to feed all these people." Jesus said, "Look around the crowd and see what you can find." Andrew found a young boy with five loaves of bread and two fish, and brought the boy to Jesus. Jesus invited everyone to be seated on the green grass. Jesus took the bread...looked up into heaven...gave thanks...broke it...gave it to his disciples...who gave it to the crowds. And they *all* ate and were *all satisfied* ...and... there were twelve baskets of bread left over... The number who ate were five thousand men, plus women and children.

And then comes the final twist to the story, the final intrigue to this saga. Jesus and his disciples got into a boat and sailed back again across Lake Galilee. And as they arrived in the boat, the disciples began discussing quietly among themselves, out of earshot of Jesus, "Who brought the bread? Did anyone bring any bread for lunch?" And Jesus, knowing their thoughts, asked them: "Don't you men get it? Don't you understand? Are you so hard headed? Are you so hard hearted? You just saw the feeding of the five thousand and twelve baskets of bread which were left over. Don't you get it about who I am? Don't you get it about the abundance generosity of God? Don't you get it that God will take care of you in your needs? Don't you get it, even after you have personally witnessed these miracles?"

And that story, about the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish, that story seems to capture the essence of *all the people* involved. That's why it was told over and over again. This story captures the *very essence* of Jesus as the wondrous Son of God. It captures the *very essence* of God, in God's *abundant and extravagant* generosity and grace, twelve and seven baskets full of bread left over. And it captures the *very essence* of us his disciples, who don't get it, even after we have seen first hand, God's miraculous work in our lives.

So a few thoughts borrowed from a rabbi: Jesus can work miracles with five loaves and two fish. That is at the heart of

the story, that the little boy brought his meager gifts to Jesus, his five loaves and two fish, and look what mighty miracles God did with them. And God wants to do the same with us; that we bring our meager gifts to God, our five loaves and two fish, our meager and ordinary talents and gifts, we bring the simplicity of who we are to God, and look what mighty miracles God can do with our little lives.

The key for me is that the little boy *surrendered* his meager gifts to Christ, and at the heart of the story today is the implied invitation *for us to surrender* our little gifts, the gift of our lives to Christ, and then see what mighty miracles God can do in and through us. That's what God wants from you and me, to surrender, to give the gifts of our lives to him.

Implied in the story is this question: Have you surrender your five loaves and two fish to Christ? Have you surrender the meagerness of who you are to Christ? You would be amazed at what mighty miracles God can do with your meager self when you have surrendered who you are to Christ? The question is persistent when the memory of this story lingers on: "Have you surrendered? Have I?" Like the little boy did.

Sometimes people ask about this story: "How did he do it? How did Christ feed all those people with so little food, with merely five loaves and two fish?" I like what one commentator suggested: Some people want Jesus to work a transformation of the loaves, so that the loaves continually multiply, endlessly, so that the loaves themselves experience transformation and become an endless supply of bread. But others suggest that what was really transformed were the selfish hearts of five thousand men; that when these five thousand men saw the example of the little boy giving Jesus his five loaves of bread and two fish, these men were inspired to look inside their coats and share the food that they brought with them, food that had been hidden inside their clothing. The real transformation then, was not of the

loaves, but of five thousand selfish hearts. The Bible says: "A little child shall lead them."

I ask you: which would be the greater miracle? The transformation of the loaves or the transformation of selfish hearts? I would like to suggest to you that some people would prefer to focus on the transformation of the loaves in order to avoid focusing on their own selfish hearts that need to be transformed. Focus on the magic of it all in order to avoid the transforming miracle needed in *my* life and heart.

If Christ worked that miracle today, and transformed five thousand or five million selfish hearts, we would feed the whole world. Jesus said that Christians today would do greater miracles than he did when he was on earth; and if the selfish hearts of Christians were transformed, we would feed the entire globe. Focus on Christ's transformation of selfish human hearts and you will discover the essence of this miracle.

But also, today, we need to talk about Holy Communion. In this passage, the liturgical references seem clear. Jesus took the bread...looked up to heaven...gave thanks (gave Eucharist)...broke the bread...gave it to his disciples...who gave it to everyone...and they all ate and were satisfied.

These actions seem parallel to Holy Communion. And then we read the Gospel of John's version of this story, and we discover that the feeding of the five thousand is a prelude to Jesus' teaching that "I am the Bread of life". In John, chapter six, we also find the most complete description of Holy Communion in the whole Bible. In John, chapter six, Christ says: "I am the Bread of life. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood, I live in that person and that person lives in me." "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will never die but live forever." Incredible words. Incredible promises.

For some of you, Holy Communion is a problem. You may be thinking in the recesses of your mind, "Holy Communion today? Oh no, the service will be fifteen minutes longer? Holy Communion today? Time to people watch and see who is and isn't in church? Holy Communion today? O shucks. We'll be late for..." But not for the early church. For those first Christians, the receiving of Our Lord's Body and Blood was a miracle.

The miracle! The transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood! The transformation of selfish human hearts! Forgiveness? Never die? Live forever? Food for the soul? My soul? Food for the spirit, my spirit, the spirit in me, being fed by the Holy Spirit? O yes, it was sacred time, the miracle of Holy Communion.

And then, I am intrigued by the last twist to the story, the final surprise to the story. The disciples had personally witnessed the feeding of the five thousand, and then when they were alone, facing their own need, they asked the question among themselves: "Who brought bread? Who brought stuff for lunch?" They didn't get it. *They saw miracles for others but didn't understand it for themselves.*

So often, I am just like that. I see the miracles of God first hand. I saw a miracle in Steve Page's life, when Prostate cancer was eradicated by prayer, and the good work of a skilled surgeon. I saw how God worked a miracle in Flo Ravenhall's life who had a car accident in order to find an aneurysm. Flo had been a walking time bomb. It was a miracle for Flo, that it took an accident for the doctors to find that aneurysm. It was Steve's transformed life that allowed him to place his whole trust in God. I see God's miracles. I see signs of God working and intervening in your lives, and then....when all alone by myself at night, I ask: "God, are you real? Is there really a God, a personal God, who watches over and participates in my life?" And I laugh at myself, having seen God's miracles day by day, and I still question God's existence and intervention in *my own* life. Does this ring in a bell in you? Seeing miracle after miracle in the lives *of others*, but then when

it comes to you and your own life, you question and doubt God's miraculous goodness to you? How human and how broken we are!

This story was the old favorite of the early church, told over and over again. Why? Because it captured the essence of Jesus, the wondrous, loving Son of God. It captured the essence of God's abundant grace and generous gifts to us, with more than twelve baskets left over. It captured the essence of our lives, who having seen the miracles of God day by day, all around us, we still doubt and ask, "where is God's action in my life?"

And so we go to commune with our God...

(various sources, all freely adapted)