

Jesus Feeding the Five Thousand
First in a Series of Four Sermons, “Jesus the Miracle Worker”
August 5 and 6, 2023
Tenth Saturday and Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 14: 13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate 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 on them and healed their sick. 15 Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” 16 But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” 17 They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” 18 And he said, “Bring them here to me.” 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Two of today’s appointed lessons focus on food, which is a topic near and dear to my heart. People who care deeply about me wish that I would eat more broccoli and less lemon filled doughnuts. More cauliflower and less bacon cheeseburgers. More carrots and less chocolate chunk ice cream covered with chocolate chips and chocolate syrup. More celery and less meat and potatoes and bread. I think it’s fair to summarize the diet my cardiologist wants me to follow in this way - “if it tastes good, spit it out.”

Today’s Gospel shows Jesus multiplying five loaves of bread and two fish into a free banquet for 5000 men plus women and children. And in today’s Old Testament lesson, Isaiah pictures the grace of God as a banquet to which we are invited free of charge and satisfaction guaranteed.

Wedding banquets these days may be satisfaction guaranteed, but they come at a high price. According to one study, the cost of the average wedding in Florida these days is \$30,000. According to one expert, you should budget \$100 for every guest you intend to invite to your wedding.

I asked Debi how much we budgeted for our wedding reception back in 1974 in the Concordia College, St. Paul, cafeteria, and she guessed at \$2.25 per plate. My main memory is that the buns for the ham sandwiches were not buttered. Which was a very distressing mistake, in my mind. Where I come from, buns, by definition, should be slathered with butter on both sides.

Of course, the crowds in our Gospel lesson for today didn't care if their bread was buttered or not. They were just delighted to be fed. What an amazing and life changing event this miracle had to be - not just for the disciples, but for hundreds and even thousands of people who participated or heard about it through the grapevine.

Today's sermon is the first in a series of three sermons focused on Jesus the Miracle Worker. The Oxford dictionary defines miracles as *a surprising and welcome event that is not [explicable](#) by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency.*

One of my seminary profs, Dr. Henry Eggold, offered a three-part definition of Biblical miracles: 1) an effect in nature not attributable to any of the recognized operations in nature nor to an act of man, 2) indicative of divine power, and 3) serving as a sign or witness to divine power.

A total of 33 New Testament miracles are recorded for our learning: 9 nature miracles, 21 miracles of healing, and 3 resurrections. In five miracles, believing patients made their own appeal to Jesus; in nine miracles, friends or relatives appealed to Jesus for help, and in 11 miracles, Jesus acted on the basis of his love.

At least four purposes of miracles can be identified. 1) They relieve human needs. 2) They signal that the kingdom of God is here. 3) They invite us to trust in God above all else. 4) They are a judgment against unbelief and unbelievers.

Two lessons we would learn today about Jesus the Miracle Worker. The first is to be grateful for His compassion. And the second is to be amazed at His omnipotence.

Lesson #1 is to be grateful for His compassion.

Compassion literally means "to suffer together." Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion is not the same as empathy or altruism, though the concepts are related.

The context of this particular miracle was that Jesus had just heard the report that his cousin John the Baptist had been imprisoned, beheaded, and buried. Upon hearing that news, Jesus and His disciples withdrew into a private place where they could suffer together. In addition to that, the disciples had just returned from a mission trip aimed at the lost sheep of the house of Israel. No doubt Jesus wanted to get away from the crowds and debrief in private.

This was a turning point in his ministry. Great hostility had arisen in opposition to His mission. Jesus would still be preaching to and healing the multitudes, but no

longer would he be seeking publicity. It was time to prepare the Twelve for the end of the road on a little hill outside of Jerusalem.

When the disciples saw the crowds, their hearts were running on empty, but not so with Jesus. He had compassion on them and began to heal their sick. The disciples took the practical position and wanted to send them into town and buy food for themselves. But Jesus took the Fifth Commandment position and wanted to help and befriend his neighbors in their bodily need. The disciples saw that there were only five loaves of bread and a couple of fish to share, but Jesus saw an opportunity for His Father to get glory.

The devil would tempt us in every one of our days to complain about what could be better in life, but this miracle would teach us to receive every morsel of our daily bread - even the vegetables - with thanksgiving. Our sinful nature is inclined to take our abundance and our prosperity for granted, but this miracle reminds us to count our blessings in such a way that our gratitude towards God is evident and even contagious to those near and dear. The sinful world would invite us to join in on the grumbling and the groaning and the moaning about the cup that seems half or almost completely empty. But this miracle gives us eyes to see that in fact our cups are running over and that the mercies of our God are new every morning.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who keep on putting themselves in a position where the Spirit of God can be their Teacher, their Counselor, and their Encourager. More and more they are eager to cry with those who are crying, hurt with those who are hurting, and suffer with those who are suffering. Less and less do they look the other way and wish for people to fend for themselves, and more and more they find themselves stepping out of their comfort zones, looking people in the eyes, and caring about the same things their Savior cares about.

Lesson #2 is to be amazed at His omnipotence.

Notice that Jesus had already given the crowd the one thing needful. He had already taught them in parables that revealed the nature of the Kingdom of God. But now we see that He looks to His Father in heaven, blesses a supply that was ever so meager and insignificant, breaks the loaves, and invites his disciples to begin distributing. As they do so, the food multiplies, thousands of folks eat until they are satisfied, and 12 baskets are filled with broken pieces left over.

Notice how Jesus provides the bread and the fish. He gave them to his disciples who gave them to the crowd. His gifts were multiplied through the hands of the disciples as they handed out the bread and the fish.

In much the same way, God works through his people now to do his will. We are called not only to hang onto his gifts, but to give them out. Luther writes that our many tasks and callings are masks of God, used to fulfill his will.

It's one thing to be amazed at a cardiologist and his well trained staff installing a stent in your heart for the purpose of increasing blood flow, it's quite another to give God all the glory for working through people to do good works. It's one thing to be grateful for those who have helped and befriended us over the years, it's quite another to direct all that gratitude to the one true God. It's one thing to enjoy every sunrise and every birthday and every anniversary and every one of our possessions, but it's quite another to be in close communion with the source of all of that joy.

Two takeaways, in closing, as we savor this snapshot of Jesus multiplying just a little bit of food into a sumptuous feast that satisfied thousands of hungry folks.

Takeaway #1 is to not waste any of God's good gifts.

When all was said and done, it appears, as my mom used to say, that for some, their eyes were bigger than their stomachs. They had received more than they could eat. The disciples were able to fill 12 baskets with leftovers. This miraculous food was not to be thrown away. It filled exactly twelve of the little wicker baskets that were used by travelers to carry food and necessities. One basket each for the Twelve, none for Jesus. Which means that he who had created all this bounty created an opportunity for the Twelve to share their abundance with him.

This may not be the main lesson to be learned from this miracle, but it is a lesson taught elsewhere in Scripture - that part of being a good steward of all of the time and the treasure and the talents given by God to us is not wasting any of it. To see every one of our days as an opportunity to be amazed at the beauty of His creation. To see all of our possessions and paychecks and pension plans as a reason to be amazed at God's generosity. And to see all of our talents and abilities as a cause for humility, as we realize they are all blessings on loan from God.

Takeaway #2 is to trust in God above all else through all the ups and downs of life.

Jesus didn't feed the hungry crowds every night. And He didn't heal every sick person He met. That wasn't His main work. His main work was getting to the cross where He could have compassion on every soul that ever lived. That's where He could pay the price none of us could ever begin to pay. At the cross, He offered up what didn't look like much, but in fact His broken and bleeding and battered body turned out to be exactly what would satisfy the wrath of a righteous God. His holy and precious blood turned out to be exactly the sacrifice that would end all other required sacrifices.

St Paul makes the case for us trusting in God above all else by arguing from the greater to the lesser - He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things.

Jesus makes the same case by arguing from the lesser to the greater, ***“Which of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him.***

No doubt, we will have our bad days, our good days, and our really good days.

On our bad days, we will see folks who need our help and choose not to get involved.

On our good days, we will see those same circumstances as an opportunity for the love of Jesus Christ to be shared. We will be grateful for His compassion and amazed at His omnipotence.

On our really good days, we will step out of our comfort zones and take the time to hurt with those who are hurting, cry with those who are crying and suffer with those who are suffering, in the Name of Jesus.

On every day, rain or shine, no matter what, our Father in heaven will see us as His precious and forgiven children, our Savior will have compassion on us, and the Spirit of God will be our Teacher, our Counselor, and our Encourager. Amen