

A Great Crowd Fed

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ Now 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. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then 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. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Maybe it was the size of the crowd on hand to see; maybe it was the "wow" factor; maybe it was the importance of the event for the ministry of Jesus.

Whatever it was, none of the Gospel writers missed it. This is the only miracle of Jesus included in all four Gospels. There is no sermon in this story, nor is there a parable in words; this is a story filled with activity. Perhaps one of the lessons embedded in this story is that meeting human need has its own lasting impact.

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The account of the feeding of five thousand in Matthew 14:13-21 has been an inspiration to Christians in many diverse situations. Jesus had been with both the crowds and his disciples explaining the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven. He had talked about seeds sown on different types of soil; of weeds growing with the good plants; of mustard seeds; of yeast; of treasure found in a field; of a pearl of great price. Then, this feeding of the five thousand occurs immediately after Jesus and the disciples learn of the brutal murder of John the Baptist and after a long day with large and desperate crowds. The disciples understandably were

seeking to get away. They were grief stricken. So the disciples—as we would likely do—tell the crowds to go away.

We read, however, that Jesus had compassion, and he invited the multitudes to eat. The disciples were shocked, for they could locate only two fish and five loaves, hardly enough to feed themselves, much less a crowd of thousands. Nevertheless, Jesus instructed them to feed the crowd, and not only did all get enough to eat, but there were also twelve baskets left over. The disciples were in for surprise that evening—as they were often—at the miraculous power of God's love.

As this is the only miracle story found in all four Gospels, it obviously was of great importance to the early church. Some suggest it was read regularly when early Christians gathered at the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist). Others suggest that it shows a parallel to God's provision of manna from heaven for the children of Israel. More important than any of these reasons, this account of the feeding of the five thousand was treasured by the early church because it taught Christians the very heart of the gospel message and was a deep source of hope and inspiration for Christians who were seeking to be faithful against great odds.

In so many parts of the world we see the resurrection power of the story of the loaves and fishes coming alive in our midst today. It is a story of great power because it demonstrates that God is love, teaches what it means to follow Christ, and assures us of God's power for good in the world.

First and foremost, this story teaches us that God is love. The key reality is that Jesus had compassion. In spite of incredible pressures to the contrary, compassion for people was his prime motivation. It is not compassion in the abstract. It is a compassion that cares deeply about the most basic needs of all of us. In this event, it was concern that there be food for the hungry. This story confirms what so many in Latin America have helped us see as Jesus' basic orientation, that of an "option

for the poor." God, who is the ultimate power of the universe, intends peace in the world, an end to hunger, the well-being of families, and spiritual wholeness for all people. I remember reading about Nelson Mandela, as president of South Africa, his first question upon talking to a fellow citizen, was to enquire if they had eaten, where they were fed. It is the same with our compassionate God, who is concerned that His people are fed.

The second lesson we learn from this account is about being disciples—about the awesome responsibility that God has entrusted to us. Jesus did not feed five thousand. He told the disciples to do it. God has entrusted us to be the body of Christ—the hands and feet through which God's work is done in the world. God does not work alone, but through people, you and me. To follow Jesus is to express our faith in concrete acts of love, justice, and compassion toward others. It is no accident that Matthew tells us that we will meet Jesus in reaching out to the "least" of our brothers and sisters—the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned.

Most Bibles give a heading to this story that reads something like "Jesus Feeds Five Thousand." Actually, Jesus gives food only to the disciples, who then feed the others. While it is clearly the miracle of Jesus that feeds the multitude, this does not reduce the call to discipleship to a call of passive piety. Our call is to active ministry that meets human need. Jesus feeds the Twelve; the Twelve feed the five thousand.

Third, this Gospel story reminds us that when we need it most, God will give us the power to work for good in the world, a reality many of us have discovered when faced with situations we were not sure we could manage. When Jesus told the disciples to feed the five thousand, the disciples thought it was impossible. The needs were so great, and the resources were so few. Have not we felt the same? However, when the disciples worked together and followed Jesus, they had more than enough.

This is not the only time that disciples have discovered the power of the Holy Spirit to do great things when Christians join together in unity and faithfulness to God's good purposes for the world. The promise of the story of the feeding of the five thousand is that if we join together in unity and faithfulness, God will be with us. It is not a promise of the absence of struggle and pain—Jesus even had to go the way of the cross—but a promise that God will be with us and that God's intention for love, peace, and justice in the world will ultimately prevail.

This is a promise that we badly need if we are even to dream about being faithful in carrying out the call of Christ to join Jesus in offering "life in fullness" to a world gripped by the forces of evil, which are driving millions of people and the planet itself into the most desperate of situations. We know that it is a promise the Lord kept with the disciples on that hillside in Galilee and has kept with God's faithful people over the centuries—and will keep with us!

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is very familiar to most Christians, but its message is always new:

- That God loves and cares for every person on earth and that the promise of "life in fullness" extends to every creature and to the creation itself
- That God calls us to be disciples—to be the means through which God's work is done in our world today
- That God promises us in the Holy Spirit that the power of the love of God can break through even in the most unlikely places when we join together as faithful disciples seeking God's good intentions for our world

The events that took place on that hillside in Galilee two thousand years ago were a miracle to the five thousand people assembled that day. However, the deeper message is the miracle of God's love for the 7.8 billion people on our planet today and the miracle that we are called to be partners with God in making fullness of life become a reality today for the world that God loves. **Clifton Kirkpatrick**

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