

Sermon
Matthew 14:13-21
August 3, 2008
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May the words my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in thy sight, Oh God, my strength and my Redeemer.

Compassion

As our Scripture passage opens today we find that Jesus is very sad and has withdrawn to a deserted place. It is easy to imagine the reasons for this as he was rejected in his own hometown, his preaching was not understood. So then he has to switch his preaching style by speaking in parables, so that his followers would pay attention and begin to understand what he is really saying to them. But most of all Jesus is probably broken hearted as he has just received the news that John the Baptist, his Prophet, the man who baptized him, has been murdered by Herod. When the crowds heard this, for I am sure the news traveled fast, that John the Baptist had been killed, they followed Jesus. We have to wonder if there are really two sides to this story. Did the crowds follow Jesus, out of compassion for him, as well as their

own response to their grief over the death of John the Baptist?

Although Jesus had sought to be alone his compassion drew him back out to the crowd, and he went back to work and cured the sick among them.

This story, which is often referred to as the feeding of the 5000 is one of the most popular biblical stories. I'm sure you've heard it many times, for it appears not only in the Gospel of Matthew but also in the Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Luke, and even in the Gospel of John. It is not hard to imagine why this story is told over and over again. For this story captures the essential truth about Jesus and the Christian message.

This is one of those stories that is referred to as a miracle story. I believe there is a miracle in this story, but I tend to agree with Barbara Brown Taylor, when she writes in her book, *The Seeds of Heaven*, "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 I do believe a miracle occurred in this story.

Not only physically but most importantly, in a spiritual transformation of the crowd that came to be with Jesus.

It is not difficult to imagine what happened that day. As usual, the disciples do not know what to do as it becomes later in the day and they see the huge crowd before them. All they can think about is how they are going to feed all these people in this deserted place. They take the practical approach and, of course, run to Jesus asking him to send the crowd away so the crowd can go into the village and buy their own food. But Jesus does not do that. He tells his disciples that the crowd did not need to go away, but that the disciples will give the crowd something to eat. Can't you just imagine Peter and the rest of them, frantic once again, not knowing what to do and saying, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

Jesus then takes the loaves of bread. As he breaks them he looks up to heaven. He blesses them. Imagine the power of seeing Jesus bless this small amount of bread. One can imagine the crowd standing in awe. As the disciples hand the bread out to the

people, more and more food begins to be passed around. But does the food really come from these five loaves? Symbolically it does. But I imagine what really happens is that the crowd begins to understand that it is themselves that need to partake of this blessing and share their food with each other. Think about it. It is highly unlikely that they would have gone to this deserted place without their own food.

Let's think for a minute about food, and the sharing of food. It is indeed powerful. It not only feeds our body, but symbolically, it feeds our spirits. The offering and the sharing of food, whatever little bit we may have, is at the heart of hospitality. It is like inviting someone into your life. Think about our own lives and what sharing a meal with others can mean. Remember the many meals you have shared with your family, your friends and even here at the church during coffee hour or our potlucks. In the sharing of meals together, we become nourished by not only the food, but by the companionship and the community. There are times in our lives that it is important not to be alone and it is often

said that eating alone can be a time of great loneliness. So it doesn't matter what we eat, but it's the act of engaging in eating with someone that helps us feel connected to life and one another. Who we invite to our table also says a lot about who we are and how we understand the Christian message.

As I read and reread this Scripture passage, I kept remembering a story from my own life. From my very earliest memories I can recall my mother's dear friend Jenny. She was a kind and compassionate woman and a woman of great faith. She and my mother seemed to have such wonderful times together, and I knew that my mother cared very deeply for Jenny. Whenever Jenny and her husband and daughter called and said they would like to come and visit us, my mother stopped everything and went into her kitchen and began to prepare a wonderful Italian meal. That was quite unusual for my mother, for she was always too busy with her store to do much cooking. If you came to our house, you were lucky to get a boloney sandwich and a bottle of pop. But even if Jenny and her family dropped in because they were out for

a ride and thought they would stop and see us, the same thing happened. My mother called someone to watch the store and fled to the kitchen to make a meal so that we could all sit and eat together.

I was quite impressed by my mother's friendship with Jenny for it seemed to be such a deep friendship, one that had been forged through good times and hard times. When I was older, I asked my mother about her friendship with Jenny. I was not prepared for the story that my mother told me.

She said that she met Jenny during the Great Depression. My mother and her father had just moved to the small mill town, but there was no work to be found. They ate the food that they had been able to bring with them, but when the food ran out, there was no money to buy more food and my mother and grandfather were too proud to ever have asked anyone for food. My mother had made friends with Jenny, a young woman my mother's age who lived nearby. There were both nice Italian young women who shared a lot in common.

Mom told me that she never said anything to Jenny about their not having food. But clearly, Jenny knew that they didn't. Jenny didn't ask my mother about it either, nor did she buy food and take it to my mother. What she did was to invite my mother and grandfather to her family's house for dinner. She invited them to share a meal with her and her family. I'm sure Jenny did not have much either at the time, but she had a grand heart and she understood that sharing a meal together was what was most important. My mother said she could never forget this; for Jenny not only fed her when she was starving but she also offered her friendship and a place at her table.

I did not understand at first, why, when I read the Scripture passage for today, I kept thinking about Jenny and my mother -- until it finally dawned on me that this story really isn't about the feeding of the 5000. It's really about the feeding of the 20, 000 or so, if you remember the last line of the Scripture which says, "And those who ate were about 5000 men, besides women and children."

This tells us that there were women and children there, not just 5000 men.

This story, recounted in the Gospel of Matthew, says more about the time that the Gospel itself was written than perhaps the time it is describing. In this case, you must remember that the Gospel of Matthew was written a long time after Jesus' death. We know from the earliest documents we have that, men and women were treated equally as Jesus disciples. However, by the time we arrive at the writing of the Gospel of Matthew Christianity is being accepted and social norms are being applied to the Gospel itself. And I see that happening in this story.

The women and children are an afterthought. But if we take this story to mean that people began sharing their food with each other, I ask you, who do you think prepared and brought the food to this deserted place? I don't think we have to look any further than our kitchen downstairs. Who generally prepares and serves the food in our own church? It is the women. I believe that in

most societies, it is the women who are in charge of the food, the preparation and the feeding of others.

I can just imagine in our story today the women bringing their baskets filled with food. As they lay out the food for their families to eat, and they witness the blessing upon the bread, they begin to share what they have with others. Now, I'm not saying that the men did not have a hand in this, for it was the job of the man to provide for his family. All I'm saying is that this is a place in the Gospel that calls us to look deeper than the words on the paper and acknowledge the powerful role of women in the Christian faith. There are so few opportunities to do this in the New Testament. Women are basically silent in the New Testament other than Jesus' mother Mary and Mary Magdalene. I only say this to give you food for thought.

In no way does this diminish the miracle that Jesus produced in the story. At the center of this Gospel story we find Jesus meeting our most basic human needs and our deepest hungers. It's not just about feeding the hungry, but also feeding a hungry world

both spiritually and practically. This story calls all of us to participate in the miracle of Jesus and the miracle of our faith. We are all Disciples of Christ, and this is a matter of discipleship. It's a matter of giving what we have in faith, hope, and love. It is about sharing and caring for one another and our world. It is about action fueled by a commitment to community. The sharing of bread, a simple and profound thing, is at the heart of our life together in the church. Perhaps, we can begin to think of communion in our church, as not only a symbol of our unity with Christ but also as a call to discipleship. Who do we invite to our table? Amen