

It's Not Your Dinner Time Yet

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Matthew 14:13-21 — 14:13 Now when Jesus heard [about the killing of John the Baptist], he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14:14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 14:15 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." 14:16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 14:17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five pieces of bread and two fish." 14:18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 14:19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five pieces of bread and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the bread, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 14:20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 14:21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

It's stories like this one, the feeding of the 5000, that make me wonder what it would've been like to be one of the twelve apostles. On one hand, I'm sure it was grand: Jesus inspired them with his teachings and amazed them with his miracles. The crowds loved him, at least for most of the way, and so the twelve apostles got to be in the inner circle of an ancient celebrity. On the other hand, though, it wasn't all fun and games. Jesus routinely embarrassed the apostles whenever he hung out with the poorest and shadiest of folk, which he did often. What's more, I bet he scared the apostles half to death whenever he clashed with the Pharisees or the temple scribes. These were powerful people, with friends in high places, who Jesus called "hypocrites" and "vipers." If Jesus isn't careful, he might get himself killed—and maybe his closest followers as well. So, the lives of the apostles are filled with both beauty and danger, and each day seems to hold a new surprise.

On the particular day of our story this morning, Jesus and his apostles have just learned about John the Baptist's death. Perhaps you recall the story. King Herod had imprisoned this prophet, because he had been criticizing the king's marriage to his brother's wife. On the king's birthday, he threw a lavish party for himself, with plenty of booze and questionable dancing, and—long story short—one thing led to another, and Herod ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. To give an analogy (and only a political analogy is appropriate): it would be kind of like our president throwing an extravagant all-night party for himself, and then the next morning, we all found out that in the middle of the night, he had ordered the execution of Congressman John Lewis or Congressman John McCain. John the Baptist had a large following among the masses. They loved his fiery, eccentric ways of speaking truth to power. So, word about his execution spread quickly, and at the beginning of our passage this morning, word reaches Jesus and his apostles. Perhaps Jesus is afraid that he might be next. Or perhaps he's just so saddened by the

corruption and the injustice of John's death that he feels like he needs to get away for a while. Either way, Jesus and his apostles get into a boat and get out of town.

They dock their boat in a deserted place, hoping for some quiet time. But word about Jesus spreads quickly too, and a crowd is actually there, on the shore of this deserted place, waiting to meet them. I imagine that Jesus is a bit disappointed here, but the text tells us that he has compassion on the crowd nevertheless. These are the masses of poor people and social outcasts who are most in need of a healer, a liberator, a savior. So, for the rest of the day, until evening comes, Jesus is milling about them, talking with them, and healing those who are sick.

Now, as nightfall draws near, the apostles do something that I imagine we've all done before. You know how sometimes you want something, but you don't want to say that you want it, so instead you say that someone else wants it? Like, you're at a party, or some other social function, and you're with your significant other, and it's getting late, and you want to leave, so what do you do? You let out a soft sigh, and then you say to your significant other, and to the people around you, "Well, honey, we should probably get going—you've got a big day tomorrow!" You're not *really* thinking about that person's big day; what you're *really* thinking about is that you want to get some sleep!

I imagine that the apostles are doing something similar in this morning's story. We can safely assume that while Jesus has been talking and healing, they haven't been eating. And now, it's the end of the day, and they are, understandably, hungry! So, they convince one of the apostles to go up and tap Jesus on the shoulder. "Um, excuse me, Jesus. We were just talking, and um we were thinking, you know, these crowds...they must be pretty hungry by now! Why don't we call it a day, huh? Tell them to be on their way. They can go home, get some food, and then—well—we can figure out something for ourselves. Does that sound alright to you, Jesus?"

They must have thought it was a sure-fire request. After all, Jesus is human, and he hasn't eaten all day either, and besides, at the start of the day he was hoping for some me-time. But lo and behold, Jesus has a few more surprises in store for them. "We don't need to send the crowds away," he says. "You give them something to eat." Imagine the jaw of the apostle who tapped Jesus on the shoulder dropping in that moment. In his head, he's probably saying, "Oh yeah, sure, Jesus. And should I place that order with the man on the moon or with Mars? Jesus, we literally only have five pieces of bread and two lousy fish. What do you expect us to do with that, huh?" Well, apparently, Jesus expects them to do *something* with that, because he says, "Bring them here to me." He then gets more than 5000 men, women, and children to sit down (which sounds like a miracle in and of itself). Then, he takes the bread and the fish—all of which he can hold in his two hands. He blesses them, meaning he gives thanks to God for them, he breaks them, and he gives them back to the apostles, to share with the crowd. And all the jaws drop even lower at what happens next: everyone gets fed. And according to the story, they don't just get a little nibble: the text makes clear that they all ate, and they were all filled. These are the poorest of the poor in ancient Palestine. They hardly know what it feels like to be full.

Now, there are some Christians who don't think that a supernatural miracle happened here. Instead of Jesus physically multiplying the bread and fish, what probably happened, they say, is that Jesus simply started sharing them, and then others started sharing as well. Really, it's unlikely that *no one* in this crowd of thousands brought *any* food with them, as they traveled to this deserted place for the day in search of Jesus. And besides, some Christians say, the real point of the story is that God can do much with little. If that's you, that's fine with me. This morning, I'm not so much concerned with where all this bread and fish came from; I'm more interested, actually, in what happens afterwards.

The story says that there are twelve baskets leftover. I imagine that it was the apostles who filled them, since they were the ones charged with distributing all of that food, and since there are just as many baskets as there are apostles. Imagine what it would've been like to be one of those hangry dozen, ready to just get rid of all these people, so that you can start making the trek back to civilization and finally get some food—maybe within an hour or two. And then all of sudden, you're feeding a crowd of thousands, and then you're collecting, in your own basket, more food than you could have hoped to eat that evening. When the apostles were focused primarily on feeding themselves, Jesus essentially said, "It's not your dinner time, yet. Focus first on caring for the needs of those around you, focus first on the daily bread of your less fortunate neighbor, and just wait and see how abundantly blessed you will be."

But keep in mind, friends, that the blessings may not be all fun and games, either. It is amazing how controversial love can be, how hard the powerful will try to keep us from practicing generosity. Just as word spread quickly about King Herod's lavish and bloody party, so word spread quickly about Jesus providing food for more than 5000 people in the wilderness. By pairing these two stories together, the Gospel of Matthew is making a political commentary, giving a political message: are you going to be like King Herod, using all of your wealth on yourself and destroying lives in the process? Or are you going to be like Jesus and his apostles, using the little that you have been given to give more and more—and see what kind of miracle God does? Amen.