

"Feeding Frenzy"

Matthew 14:13-21

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Matthew now turns to two powerful miracles that show Jesus' power over nature: his feeding of the 5,000 and his walking on water. Imagine how these two events turned up the volume even more on the question of who this person is—really, the same question his disciples already asked in chapter 8:

The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" (Matthew 8:27)

Later, the disciples are answering their own question. At the end of chapter 14, Matthew writes,

Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:33)

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels. Maybe it's because of how powerfully the story shows how Jesus takes care of our needs, both physical and spiritual.

Just like God provided for his people in the wilderness, he provides for us in Jesus.

Exodus tells about how God brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and brought them into freedom. The story reminds us of how God made a daily miracle to take care of them. The people cried out for help, grieving what they missed about their old life, scared of the future, sure they were going to starve in the wilderness. But the Lord told Moses,

"I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. (Exodus 16:4)

God did provide for his people and it preserved them for forty years.

It's interesting to compare that old story of Israel in the desert, and the Matthew's new story of the feeding of the 5,000 with the version we find in John's Gospel. John shared how Jesus provided a commentary on that event that ties the two stories together: the experience of Israel in the desert with the feeding of the 5,000. What sparks the conversation is the crowd asking Jesus for a sign he's really from God:

"What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (John 6:30-33)

That helps us makes sense of what was happening that day in Galilee. Jesus took care of the people's need because he felt compassion for them. And when he did it, he was also showing them who he really was. Not just a nurse, or a healer, or a teachers, or prophet. He really was the Son of God, the Great Provider, the same one who fed the people long ago. And he would feed them with his own words and works, and not only them but us. It's why at the temptation that helped him prepare for his ministry he said,

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)

That bread is Jesus, the Word of God. Just like God fed his people in the wilderness, he feeds us at our deepest point of need. It's why he promises,

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled." (Matthew 5:6)

We will be filled—with him! With his peace, with love, with joy.

The story isn't a lesson about our innate abilities.

Now, I've heard interpretation of this story, and maybe you have, too, that suggests the story is really saying we have the capacity to fill needs ourselves. According to this interpretation, the miracle wasn't that Jesus took five loaves and two fish and made it expand to be enough for over 5,000 men, not counting women and children. Maybe 15,000 people or more. According to this line of thought, the miracle was just in getting selfish people to cooperate and share the picnics they had already brought. In other words, they didn't need a miracle, just encouragement to do what they already could for themselves.

I've got one word for an interpretation like that: "lame." It's a bad reading of the text on a lot of levels. Let me give you two reasons.

First of all, the whole point is human poverty, and God's resources. When Jesus says, "You give them something to eat," they can only come up with a pitiful amount that can hardly satisfy *ten* people. The point is they don't have enough! Just like Israel in the desert—they're not yet in a land flowing with milk and honey, they're in the desert, about to starve to death unless God comes through. The Gospels demonstrate the disciples' *lack*, not their resources, and human impossibility of meeting their need. That especially comes out in a couple lines:

Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" (John 6:7)

"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" (John 6:9)

Second of all, the miracle is clear in reading the people's response. John's Gospel, again, tells us:

After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. (John 6:14-15)

That's kind of spontaneous outburst of adoration is *not* the response of people who simply were told to be nice and share!

Jesus makes us ministers of his provision. (vv. 16, 19)

Even if the story isn't about the hidden capacities we have in us, Jesus does challenge his disciples to take care of the people's need. We also get that opportunity to help take care of people's hunger. Verse 16 tells us,

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." (Matthew 14:16)

Is that inconsistent with pointing out their need for Jesus? Not at all. The story highlights human *inability*; God's super-ability; and how he chooses to work through us, frail and limited though we are. It's like the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Did you notice the verbs used to tell what Jesus does here? Jesus

- took the bread (and fish),
- gave thanks, or blessed,
- broke it, and
- gave it to the people (Matthew 14:19)

Does that remind you of another place in the Gospel? It should—when Matthew tells us the story of the Last Supper (26:26-27) he uses these very same words, take, give thanks, break, and give.

I think that's his same call to you and me. He has taken, or chosen you. He has blessed you. He breaks you and me not of our spirit, but of our self-will, of keeping yourself at the center. Then he gives you for the sake of others, so they can know him. And whatever little we bring out of our poverty he transforms and uses to save the world. That's what we're about: to love God, love people, and to serve the world.

Are you letting him do that in your life? It's your very purpose for living. Are we letting him do that in our life as a congregation, to be given for the sake of others? It's why he has us here on Chillicothe Road in West Geauga County.

In the end, the less you have and the bigger the problem, the more the Lord can do. Jesus shows himself to be Lord by going beyond all reasonable expectations. And the

result of the meal on the lawn that day? They all ate and were satisfied (v. 20), every one of them. If you go to Jesus, he will satisfy your very deepest hungers.