

Scripture:  
Matthew 14:13-21

### **Called to Serve**

Did you know that this is the only one of Jesus' miracles that is recorded in all four Gospels? That must mean it's fairly important - or that it touched many hearts and lives. So what does this story that has become common place to us have to reveal to us about God and Jesus? What does it call us to be and do as disciples?

This is more than just an awesome miracle, this event carries some deep truths about the holy and God's desires for us as disciples and people of faith. One of the most important points of this story is found earlier in the chapter we read this morning. Let me read it for you now.

Matthew 14.1-12 At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; <sup>2</sup>and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him." <sup>3</sup>For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, <sup>4</sup>because John had been telling him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." <sup>5</sup>Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. <sup>6</sup>But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod <sup>7</sup>so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. <sup>8</sup>Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." <sup>9</sup>The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; <sup>10</sup>he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. <sup>11</sup>The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. <sup>12</sup>His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.

After this Jesus has gone to a place of seclusion to grieve the loss of his friend, and he is interrupted by 5,000 peasants and their families. Jesus however also knows the needs both physically and spiritually for these folks. While Herod is throwing a massive banquet and celebration for his birthday the common folk are starving to death outside his door. At Herod's party few are fed with an overabundance of food. At the feast of Jesus 5,000 many are fed with a small amount of food.

This miracle "is an encapsulation of provision and the poignancy of need. Sometimes we forget that to be provided for and to have our needs met are indeed miraculous moments themselves."<sup>1</sup> This is also a miraculous message of discipleship. After all it is not only Jesus who provides for the crowds. This is an invitation to action and involvement, discipleship is not just about

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<sup>1</sup> [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

following but participating. In this provision of food for many, the disciples witness that the promise of provision is their future. This is not only about what Jesus does but about what the disciples are enabled to do.

Hear the scripture again: 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.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

“In other words, you do it. You feed them

Of course, Jesus then miraculously expands the rations. That is certainly a miracle. (I am not going to get into how exactly that happened today because any of it would be speculation anyway, and that distracts us from the point of the story)...Taking away the reality of miracles does no one any good. They exist. We need them. And Jesus gets that. But I do think that the meaning of the miracle is more than the miracle itself.

In that one simple statement, Jesus is saying to his disciples, “Live already. You can’t sit back and watch me do all this awesome stuff. Live it. Live life. I am counting on you. I need you.”<sup>2</sup>

This is a miracle because it disrupts our order. Our way of thinking. That is what the kingdom of God does it takes our practical mind and assumptions and breaks them open. “I wonder if Jesus is trying to disrupt our tidiness, our preference for cause and effect. The disciples are thinking linearly. Practically. “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.” A deserted place? Where will the food come from? Late? Time to go home. We are done here. What more do you want? And come on, Jesus. These people need to fend for themselves.

“Consider again the story we have of Jesus from Matthew’s gospel: “Jesus withdrew in a boat to a lonely place apart.” ... because he had just learned of John’s death... It wasn’t the best of times for Jesus. He was trying to get a moment of peace. And according to the gospel, when the crowds heard that he was near, that he was drawing apart, “they followed him on foot from the towns.” So he fed the crowds, and after he dismissed the people, he again went off by himself. He set out to do one thing: to get some space and some time away. This proved to be difficult for him,...Is this familiar to you? Rest, time apart, a few minutes alone, a break, some space – it’s something that we all seek at the end of a busy day, or at the close of a tiring week.

Jesus was interrupted and responded, and then went on with what he was doing. Parents recognize this dynamic, and so do clergy. People with demanding jobs, family obligations, social responsibilities – this dynamic is likely familiar to all of us. We get involved

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline Lewis - IBID

in what we're doing, and we don't want to be interrupted or distracted, and so we ignore what is nudging us for attention. (like my daughter when I am working on writing this sermon.)

A few years back there was a series of television commercials sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons. There was one in particular which showed different scenes of children wanting attention: "Look what I made in school today!" and "I brought you flowers!" There was another one of a dog wanting attention from family members, and people wanting attention and to spend time with others. In each case, people were distracted, busy, un-interruptable. In each instance, the one seeking attention and time was "filled with joy and wonder in all God's works," ... In each case, the one seeking attention is ignored, put off. In each case, it is an opportunity for ministry, for witness to the loving grace of God, missed....

Have you ever caught yourself saying, "I didn't get anything done today"? Think, though: Didn't you see some people, make some phone calls, run an errand, send an email?

Even within the interruptions there can be interruptions: You're in a hurry to get out of the house, and you can't find your keys; you find your keys, lock the door, and the telephone rings; as you're rushing to your meeting, you realize that the car is out of gas, (or you loose your wallet and have to start running all around town to find it -Welcome to my Thursday last week) and then you remember that you have no money because you forgot to stop by the bank. And so it goes. Have you ever had an experience like that?

Such moments leave us vulnerable to a breaking-in of the Holy Spirit. Each point is a chance to find something lost, to greet a stranger, to learn something new.

In short, it is an opportunity for grace, a chance to bear witness to the Christ in our midst, with all that that means.

Jesus withdrew and was constantly interrupted by people clamoring for attention: Teach us! Heal us! Give us food! Prove yourself!

Lest you be tempted to think of ministry as limited to ordained ministry, all of us know there is always someone wanting something, right? Parents with children are used to being asked for attention, yes? You might be driving somewhere and stop to loan jumper cables, or walking down the aisle at the grocery store you pick up a dropped box of cereal, return lost coupons or a shopping list. A stranger might ask you for directions as you're headed back to your office, or the passenger next to you on an airplane is nervous about flying when you had hoped to settle in for a nap. These are the kinds of experiences common to all of us. A compassionate response, a helpful effort, ministry and discipleship, happens in the interruptions."<sup>3</sup>

Karoline Lewis writes "This is a major lesson in discipleship, Discipleship 101, to be exact... Discipleship is rarely tidy or convenient. What you will be asked to live -- and when -- may just be a miracle itself." The miracle here is who is cared for and who does the caring. Those not worth having food at all are giving enough food, so that they are filled. Many of these folks probably haven't had enough food to be full in a very long time. Miracles are about the in

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<sup>3</sup> <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/07/14/8-pentecost-proper-13-a-2014/>

breaking of the kingdom. And the kingdom is about caring for those who do not have enough. But the kingdom of God and the miracles are fulfilled when we disciples participate. Jesus say's "You give them something to eat" and when they did "all were filled." The inequality of food access for the Galilean peasants is important to the Romans. It keeps the power in the place they want it to be. Bringing about equality is what the kingdom is all about.

Lewis writes "The lives of the disciples became undone the moment Jesus showed up on that mountain. Experiences of "undoneness" make up what it means to be a disciple."

Surprisingly, unexpectedly, the feeding of the five thousand gives witness to what the space between death and resurrection looks like. For the crowd. For the disciples. Maybe even for Jesus. Where there is the knowing of profound lack, but experience of provision. Where we exist in the meantime of life, but can see, albeit dimly, solutions. Where and why and when we think we can't go on, but then we do.

Therein, perhaps, is the miraculous."<sup>4</sup> Therein is the kingdom of God.

May we bring it forth to all the world. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> IBID