

Reflection on the Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

Today's reading starts in the middle of something, *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself* (Matthew 14:13). In the Gospels, that happens all the time, because we're going from event in Jesus' life to another. Most of the time I just forge ahead. But this week, it really matters what was happening before. Today's reading about the Feeding of the 5,000 (and really way more than 5,000 since they didn't count the women and kids) is a compare and contrast with the story of Herod's birthday party.

At Herod's party there was incredible food and wine, a talented dancing girl, rich and powerful people. And a man's head cut off because the ruler of the land couldn't figure out how to back away from a promise he had made as a boast, as a way of showing how powerful he was.

At the beginning of the story about the Feeding of the 5,000, Jesus is looking to withdraw from the world for a bit to get some perspective. His cousin, the prophet John the Baptist, had been beheaded by Herod. Herod didn't like that John called him out on the woman he married. And Herod really didn't like that someone was challenging his power. Jesus was grieving the death of the man whom he had grown up with, who baptized him, who had been humble and honest enough to say that he was not fit to tie Jesus' sandal (John 1:27). Jesus was reflecting on where his own call from God was leading him, basically right into the same challenge to the same power. And probably to the same horrible end.¹

But the crowds follow Jesus. They want, they need, the healing he has been providing. So he doesn't get his time alone, to gain some perspective. Jesus has compassion and he heals them. The day runs along, as they do, it's evening and there's no sign of food anywhere. They're in the middle of nowhere. The disciples are thinking about the logistics, and suggest that it's time to get this mass of humanity moving back to civilization, where they can get something to eat. Jesus says that the crowd should stay where it is, and the disciples provide supper. The disciples say that they have nothing but five loaves and two fish. Jesus gets everyone to sit down, blesses the loaves by thanking God for God's generous gifts ... Give us this day our daily bread² ... and sends the disciples out to distribute supper.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 2. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 99.

² Iwan Russell-Jones, "Proper 13, Theological Perspective, Matthew 14:13-21" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 312.

So there they are, the two meals. One, a lavish, invitation-only party at the palace, with all the powerful people and dancing girls, everything that everyone should want. Or sitting on a probably muddy grass slope with well over 10,000 people sharing some rough loaves of bread after a whole day of nothing to eat. Which would you pick?

Because our Sunday school teachers did their jobs when we were little, we know we're *supposed* to pick the bread-only picnic. But many of us haven't been to a restaurant in so long, or at least to one that didn't involve a drive-thru window. I would love to go to a nice restaurant with a good menu and a well-trained wait staff. The reality TV producers aren't wrong to give us shows set in lavish, expensive locations. Jesus calls us to live in the real world, and part of doing that is being honest that, yes, sometimes it's nice to go to a fancy dinner and be waited on like a princess.

But look at what the crowd that day beside the Sea of Galilee chose. They sat down. And somehow five loaves and two fish turn into a meal for 10,000 adults and thousands of kids and 12 baskets of leftovers. If you like the image of the loaves never getting any smaller no matter how many folks ripped a chunk off, I'm good with that. That's a great miracle. If you like the idea of people putting their hand in the basket, pretending to take something out when in fact they were putting things in, I think that's pretty miraculous too, given how selfish we humans tend to be.

But for that many people to stay, for that many people to say they were satisfied enough that they didn't need the leftovers, what I see is a crowd who so wanted Jesus' dinner party to work.³ They wanted more dinner parties where everyone was invited. They wanted more dinner parties where no one was hungry. They wanted more dinner parties where no one was beheaded. They wanted more dinner parties where power and politics wasn't more important than human life. If the menu was a little basic, just the bread and fish of a normal peasant meal,⁴ but healing and compassion were on offer, then the Kingdom of God was in this world, not just the next.⁵

Jesus calls us to live in the real world, where we have real choices about the dinner parties we attend. Jesus asks us to really evaluate our choices, so that the glamor of a fancy menu in a fancy venue with fancy people is weighed against the glamor of healing and compassion and everyone getting fed. Jesus particularly asks his disciples to live in the real world. And in this story of the

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 52.

⁴ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 166.

⁵ Hare, 166.

Feeding of the 5,000, he calls them out. He won't let them get away with not living in the real world.

The disciples were absolutely right. It had been a long day, no one had had anything to eat and there was nowhere close at hand to buy it or any money to buy it with. But when Jesus challenged them to feed the crowd, they said, "We have nothing." (Matthew 14:17). "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." Five loaves and two fish are not nothing. They're something. Maybe not enough. Maybe not everything.⁶ Maybe less than what you'd need to keep 12 disciples and their teacher going for another day. But they're not nothing.

When the disciples shared the something they had, they offered bread and fish. And they offered compassion and the healing that goes with it. They offered tangible proof of their conviction that the Kingdom of God was here and now. And that's not nothing. That's the meal that 10,000+ men, women and children were longing for.

So in this coming week, when you find yourself thinking you have nothing to offer, nothing to share, that your hand and your voice isn't worth raising, check in with reality. It's something. It may be the something that opens the Kingdom of God for someone else. Your tiny, barely enough to count as anything, little something may be the thing that becomes the feast that someone has been longing to attend their whole lives. Regardless of how many fancy meals they've been to.

⁶ Anna Carter Florence, "Ninth Sunday after Pentecost," in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 100.