

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
2 August 2020

Matthew 14:13-21

I have a silly joke about bread I want to use today: The children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Christian school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large tray of bread slices. The principal posted a sign on the bread tray, "Take only one. God is watching." Further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. One child whispered to another, "Take all the cookies you want. God is watching the bread."

Today we talk about bread. The Gospel passage in Matthew is one of those miracles that appears in all four Gospels, although it changes a bit from account to account. The one element that all four accounts have in common is the use of bread. According to Lutheran Pastor Brian Stoffregen (www.crossmarks.com) the passage brings to mind a variety of images from the History of Israel that are worth mentioning. Let me briefly summarize a few of these images and themes.

1. You remember that last week we finished the Parables of the Kingdom in Chapter 13. Today we begin chapter 14 at the 13th verse, and of course, you are dying to know what happened in 14:1-12. Well, I will tell you. There was a great banquet to celebrate King Herod's birthdate, and his niece danced, greatly entertaining the guests. When Herod offered her anything in return for her great performance, the girl asked for John's head, (because she already had a Michael Kors purse.) You can see then a great contrast: In one part of the kingdom there is a great banquet that leads to the unjust death of an innocent man. In another part of the kingdom there is a banquet that leads to life, as Jesus of Nazareth heals the sick and feeds the hungry.
2. Jesus' banquet also reminds us of a different banquet that took place in the Old Testament (2 Kings 3 and then 4:42-44). Right after the prophet Elijah is taken to heaven, the prophet Elisha feeds a multitude of men with nothing but 20 loafs of bread. We have heard Jesus announce that John the Baptist was the Elijah that was to return before the Messiah came. It is proper that right after the death of the New Elijah a feeding of the multitudes would take place. There is a sense here that this feeding was the fulfillment of Biblical prophesy. Elijah has come, the Messiah is among us.
3. There are a number of "plural" words used in this passage that hearken back to Exodus and to the prophesy of Isaiah 25:6-10. We are told that *all* were fed

by Jesus' bread and fishes. We can almost remember God feeding his ungrateful people in the wilderness. We can also remember the words of Isaiah, "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear." This feeding of the crowds is reminiscent of the manna of the wilderness, but it also reminds us of the future banquet at the end of days, when the Lord will swallow up death for ever and when he will wipe away the tears from all faces (Isaiah 25:8.)

4. This miracle also anticipates another feeding with bread and wine at the Last Supper, a banquet where Jesus himself anticipates his death for all of us. A banquet that all of us celebrate and repeat regularly. God has fed his people in the wilderness of the dessert, Jesus fed his people in the wilderness of Judea, and the Risen Christ feeds us weekly by the power of the Holy Spirit through his flesh and blood until he comes again. For now we partake of that great banquet spiritually because of COVID-19, but soon we will share it in person in a more physical way, when we will gather again around this table.

The miracle we celebrate today is no ordinary miracle. This miracle fulfills biblical prophesy. It ties the Messiah to the wondering nation in the Egyptian dessert and sets the stage for the miracle that takes place at the Last Supper, when Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist. Lastly, this miracle anticipates that Great Banquet that awaits all of us at the end of days, when we are finally reunited with our heavenly Father.

I love the element of radical hospitality and radical compassion in this story. The passage begins by saying that Jesus had compassion on the crowds. Even though they interrupted his grieving over John, and even when they have been chasing him throughout the countryside, not giving him a moment's peace, he has compassion for them. He heals their sick, shares the Gospel of salvation with them, and feeds all of them.

Where all of them deserving of Christ's compassion and love? Could there have been spies just waiting for the right moment to arrest him? Where there a great number of bored spectators, following him not because they were interested in religion, but because they just wanted to be entertained? Where there any sinners among the crowds? Any enemies? Any criminals? The answer to all these questions is "Yes". This crowd was filled with enemies, "looky-lous," sinners, unrighteous and unclean people. Yet, Jesus had compassion on all of them. He loved all of them. Even with their sin, even with their propensity for violence, even in their ignorance he loved them and had compassion for them.

Here is the Good News this week. Jesus loves us even in our desperate condition. He loves us in spite of ourselves. He has compassion for us and freely forgives us, feeds us, and calls us into ministry. The great story of salvation is the fact that Jesus loves us. Even though we are undeserving, and that love is seen in his free acceptance of the cross on our behalf.

I often marvel at the way in which Jesus fed the crowds. He could have made a wonderful lunch appear in front of each person sitting on that field, he could have fed them by removing their hunger, without the need for bread and fish. He could have miraculously and supernaturally fed all just by the waving his hand. But this is not what he does.

He looks at his disciples and says to them, "You feed them!" A small group of disciples were asked to sit approximately 10,000 people in groups of one hundred (counting women and children). Then they are required to walk among each group passing out food from their baskets. Just imagine how long this must have taken! And then, these same disciples are required to collect all the leftovers into 12 baskets. Although Christ is the one who performs the miracle, the Disciples are the instruments Christ uses to bring that miracle to the crowds.

The conclusion, my friends, is very simple: "Christ has no hands in this world but our hands. He has no ears but our ears. No feet but our feet..." We are the instruments of his miracles. It is us, each and everyone of us, the people through whom God intends to bless the world. It is up to us to feed the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the isolated. We are the hands through which Christ blesses the world. The fruit of our faith requires that we love others as Christ has loved us. It is up to us. It is not sufficient to pray for the poor, while refusing to feed them. It is not sufficient to say we love humanity, while consumed with apathy for those who suffer injustice. Today Christ looks at each of us in the eye and says, "You feed them!" May he help us to so with joy and love. Amen!