

Scripture Reading for August 23 2020

Isaiah 55:1-5 (NIV)

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. ⁴ See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples. ⁵ Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.”

Matthew 14:13-21 (NIV)

³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

¹⁶ Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

¹⁷ “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

¹⁸ “Bring them here to me,” he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon: God’s Compassion and Lavish Provision

I suspect that one of the most memorable Sunday School stories is that of Jesus miraculously feeding the 5000 from a boy’s lunch consisting of five loaves and two fish. It’s a fascinating incident of wonder that fills the imagination of any child. Yet what are we to make of this as adults? Did it *really* happen? Is it a fable that we simply dismiss, along with the belief in Santa Claus, as we grow older and perhaps wiser? Given that the story stretches credibility, *why* did the gospel writers include it in their accounts

- and you should know that this miracle is the only one that appears in *all* four Gospels.¹ And what, if anything, might this narrative have to say to us today? These are the kinds of questions we will be considering this morning.

I want to begin by saying that, like many events in the gospels, we need to understand this story from a *Jewish* context, and for that, we need to make some connections with the Old Testament. There are two texts that I want to briefly mention because I believe that the Jewish readers of the gospels would have instantly made those connections, and we miss something of critical importance if we neglect to take them into account. First, there is the story of *God* providing manna for the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness in the time of Moses.² Recall that the people were grumbling to Moses and Aaron as to how hungry they were and even saying how life was much better in Egypt! God heard their cry and provided manna and quail six-days-a-week.³ A quirky thing about manna was that it could *not* be stored, it went ‘off’ quickly and was good just for the day. This was to foster trust in God for his *daily* provision, and we hear this echoed in the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread.”⁴ Second, we need to recall a miraculous event in the life of the prophet Elisha, one which also involved multiplication of food.⁵ A man brought 20 loaves of barley bread to Elisha, who said to his servant: “Give it to the people to eat.” The servant was horrified at the prospect, saying “How can I set this before 100 men?” Elisha answered, “Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the LORD says: ‘They will eat *and have some left over.*’” And we are told that is precisely what happened. Add to those stories the opening words of Psalm 107 from today’s Call to Worship,⁶ and words from prophets, like Isaiah from our Old Testament reading,⁷ who spoke of God’s generous provision in terms of an abundant and freely available banquet. Taking all these instances together, we get a rich sense of God’s *provision* and *compassion* for his people. That’s the vitally important backdrop to today’s story of Jesus feeding the 5000.

Matthew’s version of the story is slightly shorter than Mark’s, and it is interesting to compare the two along the way. Both place the feeding of the 5000 just after the death of John the Baptist, which occurred in the context of Ruler Herod’s decadent banquet.⁸ Jesus, on hearing the news that John the Baptist had been killed, retreats by boat to a region *outside* of Herod’s influence.⁹ Jesus may have wanted time alone to grieve for his cousin, or to reconsider the dangerous political situation he himself was now facing for speaking publicly about the *kingdom* of God. But the people from the towns follow him on foot to a remote, deserted place – which, in the gospel writers’ skillful retelling, mirrors the

¹ Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15. (See also Mark 8:1-10 and Matt 15:32-39.)

² Exod 16; Num 11. (This miracle of Jesus also takes place in a remote region – though the word “wilderness” is not used.)

³ They were to cook some of the double portion of manna on Friday to last for the Sabbath. See also John 6:30-70.

⁴ Matt 6:11.

⁵ 2 Kings 4:42-44. (See 2 Kings 4:1-7; 1 Kings 17:8-16 for other stories of God’s miraculous provision of abundance in a crisis.)

⁶ Ps 107:1-9. Ps 23 also begins with “green pastures” and ends with a banquet in God’s presence; see also Mark 6:34,39.

⁷ Isa 55:1-5.

⁸ See Matt 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; <https://securerusercontent.com/uploads/2018/07/Why-The-Death-of-John-the-Baptist.pdf>.

⁹ Matt 14:13. Jesus does not retaliate but withdraws – such is the nature of his kingship and his sense of mission/timing.

Israelites wandering in the *wilderness* at the time of Moses. We are told that Jesus, on seeing the crowds, had compassion for them and so he taught them and healed many.¹⁰ As Mark puts it, Jesus recognized “the people were like sheep without a shepherd.”¹¹ And that description comes from Moses, from the time God was guiding him to pick Joshua as his successor so that Israelites would *not* be “like sheep without a shepherd.”¹² Herod was no shepherd, he only cared about himself; he *lacked* compassion. I believe that literary contrast of leadership style was deliberate. If a leader lacks compassion for his or her people, oppression can soon follow. Jesus, whose name is a variant of “Joshua,” is *not* like that; he’s the *good* shepherd.¹³

One of the key take-away points of this story is that *God cares*. Even when we may think our leaders don’t really care about us, but are embroiled in their political games and scandals – never forget that God still cares about our basic needs. We are told that when evening came the disciples wanted Jesus to send the people to the nearby towns so they could buy food.¹⁴ Jesus tells his disciples “That’s not necessary, *you* give them food.”¹⁵ This echoes the words of Elisha to his servant that I mentioned earlier.¹⁶ And just as Elisha’s servant was shocked at this instruction, so were the disciples of Jesus. “*Who me?*” can also be our reply in the face of what seems like an impossible task that God wants us to do. And we can make our excuses of inadequacy, just like the disciples: “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”¹⁷ Jesus then models something that I suggest is quite profound. He says “bring what you have to me.”¹⁸ That is where *we* are to begin when faced with the impossible; we start by identifying what we have and, not holding anything back, bring that to Jesus. He then ordered the crowds “to sit on the grass.”¹⁹ When a Jew hears those words, they are reminded of Psalm 23: “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack *nothing*. He makes me lie down in *green pastures* . . .”²⁰ And then, in Mark’s and Luke’s versions, Jesus groups the people into manageable sizes. In our language, Jesus creates some order out of chaos. And then Jesus takes what there is - the five loaves and the two fish – and “looks to heaven.” The implication is that Jesus prays; he actively *brings God into the situation* as the Great Provider. There’s no need for a flamboyant, wordy prayer because, as Jesus has already told them in the Sermon on the Mount, “your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”²¹ And as Jesus looks

¹⁰ Mark 6:34b (teaching only); Matt 14:14b; John 6:2 (healing only); Luke 9:11 (both!) Why does Matthew differ from Mark here?

¹¹ Mark 6:34. (See also Ezek 34:1-16.) Matthew has already made this connection in Matt 9:36; see [12].

¹² Num 27:17.

¹³ John 10:1-21. Ps 23 also begins with “green pastures” and ends with a banquet in God’s presence; see also Mark 6:34,39.

¹⁴ Matt 14:15; Mark 6:35. Mark’s further portrayal of the disciples could mirror the “grumbling” of the Israelites in the wilderness; Matthew softens that detail. (Note: nothing is mentioned about water (in this deserted place)!

¹⁵ Matt 14:16.

¹⁶ 2 Kings 4:42-44.

¹⁷ Matt 14:17. Some have spiritualized this to mean the five loaves of bread correspond to the five books of Moses, and the two fish represent the Law and the Prophets. Food and Scripture are tied together because there is no strict separation between body and soul.

¹⁸ Matt 14:18.

¹⁹ Matt 14:19; Mark 6:38-39; Luke 9:14.

²⁰ Ps 23:1-2. See also Mark 6:34,39.

²¹ Matt 6:8 – and hence there is no need to “babble” a prayer!

to heaven and says nothing, *we* – like Matthew’s *readers* - recall the words: “Our Father *in heaven*, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. . .”²² These are words that invite God into the moment and asks that God’s kingdom be realised in *this* specific situation, including providing for the basic needs of life.

Having prayed, Jesus “blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and it was the disciples gave the bread to the crowds.”²³ That order is important. William Barclay puts it this way: “It’s true that the disciples are helpless without the Lord, but it’s also true that the Lord is limited without his disciples. Jesus has something to be done and *needs* someone to do it, someone through whom he can speak and act.” The disciples then, acting in *obedience* to Jesus’ instructions, experienced the miracle through their own hands. This modifies that earlier “Who me?” response. “Yes – *you*,” says Jesus, “But not *just* you, for *God* will be bringing his kingdom reign into reality *through* you.” Following Jesus is, then, not meant to be inactive, where we pray and then wait passively for God to do something. *No, we pray and then act and, in the process, we are to expect to see God at work in shockingly surprising ways as we respond in faithful obedience.*

What is the outcome? We are told, “All ate and were *filled*; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, *twelve* baskets full.”²⁴ Three things come quickly to mind here: First, and obviously, there was food for *all* – men, women, and children – and Matthew makes it clear that there were many more than 5000 people present.²⁵ Second, there was plenty of food *left over* – just as in the Elisha story - for God is *generous* as well as compassionate. Moreover, this is to be contrasted with the daily manna in the wilderness because that wouldn’t keep. This miracle of God’s extravagant provision of food through Jesus reveals, as the writer of the Book of Hebrews concluded, that “someone *greater* than Moses is here.”²⁶ Third, there are *12* baskets left over and that, I suggest, is a political statement!²⁷ God’s provision is for *all* the 12 tribes of Israel, contrasting this meal with Herod’s lavish banquet just for himself and his cronies.²⁸

Before moving on, let me pause and make a few comments. Yes, it is true that some scholars see parallels of Jesus breaking the bread here as pre-figuring the Last Supper.²⁹ And others see this feasting to the full as an image of final messianic banquet at the end of time.³⁰ In other words, this story can be

²² Matt 6:9-14.

²³ Matt 14:19.

²⁴ Matt 14:20.

²⁵ Matt 14:21.

²⁶ Heb 3:1-6; see Matt 12:38-42; 17:1-8; John 6:14. John 6:30-70 develops this theme, along with Jesus as the Bread of Life.

²⁷ See also Matt 19:28 (and 15:24 – the Great Commission extends this *beyond* Israel: 28:19-20.)

²⁸ Herod [Antipas] provides food *not* for the hungry, but as a demonstration of his power and wealth. In contrast, God feeds *powerless* people through Jesus and his disciples by means of a typical peasant’s meal of bread and fish. Stanley Hauerwas says: “We must feed the hungry in a way that does not allow us to gain power over those who are fed. There are violent and nonviolent ways to feed the hungry.” See also Luke 1:50-53.

²⁹ Matt 26:26-29. Perhaps one should not look too closely at the details as what is the equivalent of the wine?

³⁰ However, bread and fish are the staple diet of peasants which doesn’t do justice to the eschatological banquet image, although Jesus is the host!

seen as pointing to *future* events rather than to Old Testament incidents.³¹ I suggest these explanations try to spiritualize the story and detract from the physical hunger that is being satisfied and Jesus being vividly revealed as the successor of Moses. In the same vein, various proposals have been made to “explain” the miracle, including the crowds bringing out secretly-hidden snack lunches when called upon! Put differently, people who were self-centered learned to *share* what they had amongst each other through the example of a child. Therefore, it is not really a “miracle” of multiplication, but of changing selfish people into generous people! This is an interesting proposal. However, this tends to moralize or rationalize the story – even taking God out of it, as it implies that humans could solve the problem of world hunger if we would just cooperate together. While there may be some truth to that analysis, it hardly does justice to the way *all* the gospel writers present the story as a miraculous event. Indeed, John’s account ends with the following: “When Jesus realized that [the crowd] were about to come and take him by force *to make him king*, he withdrew again.”³² This implies something really happened to evoke that reaction, something that originated with God - and not merely a sharing of lunch together.

There are four things I would like to say in conclusion. First: *God cares!* Remember this fact during this time of uncertainty because of COVID. To those who have lost their jobs or who are on reduced hours and you’re wondering how to make ends meet; *God cares*. To those worried about the future because of health concerns; *God cares*. We are therefore invited to *include* God in our trials and *not* live as if God didn’t exist. Christians believe in a compassionate God because Jesus modelled that behaviour. Second, followers of Jesus have a responsibility to be people through whom God can work in the world. This miracle was experienced as the disciples *acted*. They may have felt inadequate for the task, but were nevertheless obedient to Jesus’ instructions, to his call on their lives. Jesus has entrusted us to be Christ’s body, filled with his Spirit, to express our faith in concrete acts of love, justice, and compassion towards others.³³ God works through people like you and me; and if we *don’t* act, things that *could* be done may well *not* be done. Thirdly, I suggest that we *not* simply adopt a minimalistic, moralistic interpretation of the story that removes the miraculous element. It’s not necessarily that it’s wrong, but it *minimizes* God’s activity in the world and puts it only in our hands. The disciples thought this situation was impossible because the needs were too great and the available resources too few. Inviting God into the situation can make the impossible, possible. Finally, as I said earlier, when we are faced with the impossible; let’s start by identifying what we have and, not holding anything back, bring that to Jesus. Let’s trust Jesus to bring order out of chaos. And having invited God into the situation, let us boldly act in faith, expecting to see God at work in astounding ways as we respond in obedience. Amen.

³¹ This certainly possible/likely, but this can only be deduced at the *end* of the gospel and with hindsight; see also [27,28].

³² John 6:15.

³³ Matthew tells us elsewhere that Jesus said, “When we do such acts to the “least of these” you do it to me” (Matt 25:40.)