

“A Feast in the Desert”
Matthew 14:13-21
September 9, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

As we return to Matthew’s gospel this fall after our summer series on the Psalms, we come today to this very well-known miracle of the feeding of the 5000. There are only two miracles that are reported on in all four gospels. One is the resurrection of Jesus and the other is this one. It is no more or less impressive than Jesus’ other miracles, but it is representative of our salvation. Heaven is often portrayed in the Bible as a great feast. The book of Revelation speaks of the great wedding supper of the Lamb. The book of Isaiah has a well-known description of our salvation that uses banqueting language. **“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine well refined”** (Is. 25:6).

This miracle is also similar to the experience of the children of Israel during their wilderness wanderings. They were fed there by the manna from heaven, and here they are fed by the one who is the bread of life. Jesus is a new Moses delivering his people from their bondage and providing for all their needs.

The feast provided by Jesus in this miracle is a direct contrast to the feast described in the previous passage, the one hosted by Herod in honor of his birthday. At Herod’s feast there was pride, scheming and murder. You may remember that it was at this feast that John the Baptist lost his life when Herod made a vow to give to the daughter of Herodias anything she asked. She wanted John’s head delivered to her on a platter, and Herod complied. At Jesus’ feast, there was healing, truth and sharing. Herod’s feast took place in a palace, while Jesus’ in a wilderness. Let’s look more carefully at the great host of this feast, the one who is our great host who provides abundantly for us.

I. The Compassion of Jesus

Matthew tells us that when Jesus heard of the death of his friend, John the Baptist, by the order of King Herod, that Jesus sought some solitude. Some have thought that Matthew’s meaning is that Jesus was hiding in fear, worried that Herod would come after him next. I don’t think so. Jesus knew that his mission was to come and die a sacrificial death. It was only a matter of time before he would experience a death far more cruel than what John endured. I think Jesus sought solitude in order to grieve. The brokenness of this fallen, cursed world touched Jesus directly in John’s death. So Jesus went to grieve the loss of another faithful prophet. He went to grieve the brokenness of the world he had created, and he went to grieve the loss of a friend.

Jesus travelled by boat to a remote location, sailing across the Sea of Galilee. This body of water was like a bowl, with the land rising around it in all directions. So the crowds saw Jesus and the direction he was headed. They went on foot and managed to arrive at the place where Jesus would land before Jesus. So Jesus, anticipating a time of solitude, discovers that just the opposite awaits him. Not only was there a large crowd there, but they were all wanting to see him. How would you have responded? I would have been tempted to get right back in the boat and find my solitude in the middle of the lake. Jesus responded differently to this interruption. Matthew tells us that Jesus responded with compassion.

Compassion is an emotion. The root of the Greek word is the word for one's bowels. Compassion means to feel something in your gut. It means to so care for another that you ache for that person when he or she is in need. The Bible says that Jesus shows us what God is like. We sometimes think of God as this cold, rational being. He is rational, but also emotional. He is moved by the emotion of compassion. Like a parent whose child is sick, Jesus dies to self and tends to the needs of this crowd. He heals those who come to him simply because their need produces in him a visceral response of compassion. Jesus could have said, "I have come to solve the systemic problem of sin. I can't be bothered by cases such as these. Everyone I heal will only get sick again, and every last one of them will eventually die anyway."

In his book, *The Healing Path*, Dan Allender speaks of a phone conversation he had with his father after he had returned from a chemotherapy treatment.

He was weak and frail. He had a portable phone and was talking to me as he walked to the upstairs bathroom. He said he was feeling ill and may need to hang up quickly. When he got to the doorway he stumbled, and I heard him crash to the floor. The phone fell out of his hands and slid out of his reach. He began vomiting. For the next twenty minutes I listened helplessly as he purged the poison out of his system. I was powerless. I could do nothing. At first I wanted to hang up so I did not have to hear his retching nor feel my rage and battle with my urge to withdraw. Instead, I stayed on the phone and prayed for him and dreamt of the day when I would be able to put my foot on the neck of evil and make the evil one pay for my father's agony.

Our God doesn't distance himself from our pain. He stays on the phone, suffering with his people. Further, he has undertaken to do something about it and will surely end all of our pain and suffering, whether sooner or later.

II. The Delegating of Jesus

Jesus spends himself so thoroughly that time gets away from him. The pragmatic disciples, probably feeling hunger pains themselves, remind him that it is getting close to dinner time. In such a remote location, no food source would have been available. Not to worry; the disciples are ready with a plan. **“Send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves”** (v. 15). Jesus has another plan. He tells the disciples that it won't be necessary for the crowds to leave. He tells the disciples that they are to feed this vast crowd, after which they declare their complete inadequacy for such a task. **“We have only five loaves here and two fish”** (v. 17). Don't think large loaves of bread. These were likely something the size of a biscuit and likely made of barley, not wheat. The fish were probably dried fish. In any case, the disciples were right about the inadequacy of this meager supply for such a vast crowd.

The command that changes everything is found in verse 18, when Jesus says to the disciples, **“Bring them here to me.”** After ordering the crowd to sit down in an orderly manner, he takes these meager supplies, looks heavenward and says a blessing. He begins breaking the loaves and handing them out to the disciples to distribute to the crowds. It's not until verse 20 that we learn a great miracle has just taken place. **“And they all ate and were satisfied.”**

Let's focus on that command Jesus gives to his disciples: **“you give them something to eat.”** Jesus still gives such commands to his Church, commands that are far too great for us to be able to achieve. He tells us to make disciples of all nations. He tells us to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. He tells us to count others as more significant than ourselves. We could go on and on with these commands that are all too big for us to fulfill. As a congregation, we believe that Jesus asks us to do something that is way too big for us, and we have stated it in our vision statement. We put that vision statement on the back page of our bulletin each week: “A community of Christ's coming kingdom, bringing hope to a broken world.” We believe that Jesus is asking us to be a community that looks like heaven. We are an outpost of the coming kingdom, a model home in the New Jerusalem. To see such a community brings hope to a broken world that is so hungry for hope.

How are we going to do that? We must not do what the disciples initially tried to do in making a plan that left Jesus out. Their plan to send the people away to fend for themselves in the surrounding towns was a completely inadequate one. All the villages around here were small. What's more, bread was typically baked in the morning and consumed by nightfall. There was likely little left to be purchased by this time. When we make our plans without reference to Jesus, we inevitably come up with such inadequate plans. What we should do is what the disciples were commanded to do when Jesus said to them about the five loaves and two fish: “Bring them here to me.” Take

whatever we have and bring it to Jesus. It's not a matter of how much we have, but of what we do with what we have.

There are a couple of helpful applications of this. One is that it helps us rid our lives of envy, one of the seven deadly sins of the Church. If it's not a matter of how much we have, but of what we do with what we have, then there is no place for envy. Imagine one of the disciples saying to Jesus, "I have managed to come up with six loaves and three fish. Good thing I'm here, so now we can feed this crowd." At our best, what we give to Jesus is woefully inadequate. This helps me be content with what I have, as well as what I don't have, instead of being envious of others.

Do you remember that time when Saul was king of Israel and David was on the rise? They were once coming back from a victorious battle against the Philistines and were greeted by a victory song and dance by the women. **"Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands"** (1 Samuel 18:7). Saul was angry when he heard it because David was celebrated for his greater victories in battle. If the song had ended after the first phrase, celebrating the simple fact that King Saul had been greatly successful in battle, I would imagine that Saul would have been delighted. It was when the comparison was made with David's ten-fold success that he became envious and angry.

I can understand Saul, because I battle this corrosive sin of envy myself. I will often hear of another pastor who is having great success, and my initial response is not to celebrate the fact that Jesus is being glorified through the faithful ministry of a brother in Christ. Rather, my initial response is often envy. What's worse, I find in my heart that what I really want is to hear some bad news about this successful pastor. This is the exact opposite of biblical love, by which we are commanded to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Envy makes me want to rejoice when others weep and weep when others rejoice.

I find this simple truth from Jesus' feeding miracle to be so helpful in fighting the envy in my heart. It's not a matter of how much Jesus has entrusted to me, but what I do with what he has entrusted to me. No matter how small the amount you have been given, when given to Jesus he will use it as he sees fit and multiply it to his good purposes. And that brings me to the second application. We are to surrender all we have, whether it is small or great, to Jesus. Jesus says, "Bring it to me." Your money, your time, your talents or any other resource is to be given to Jesus. And it brings joy to us when we do so. Jesus transforms it and multiplies it for the good of many.

I know a young man who loves to play basketball. He plays with enthusiasm and energy, even though he is saddled with a few challenges. He can't jump very high nor move very quickly. He doesn't run very fast and his

ball handling skills and shooting accuracy are below average. But he loves to play and gives it his all. That is a good picture to me of this passage. It delivers us from a focus on ourselves and what we have and transfers the focus to Jesus. It causes us to get in the game and just enjoy what Jesus will do. The less our gifts, the more we can enjoy seeing what Jesus will choose to do with them as we bring them to him.

III. The Abundance of Jesus

We are told that the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of the leftovers. The fact that there are leftovers is meant to indicate the abundance of Jesus' provision. The abundance of his provision on this day is a picture of the banqueting feast of heaven. Let me turn our attention back to that great passage from Isaiah 25, where the prophet portrays our salvation as this great feast. After describing the feast, we read these words of promise: **“He will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all people, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces”** (v. 7-8).

The Scottish poet Robert Burns said that he couldn't read these words without weeping. The covering he speaks of is the veil of mourning worn by women in grief. The Lord himself will swallow it, indicating its complete disappearance. The same thing will happen with death itself—it will completely disappear and will never appear again—never. This is the feast Jesus brings to us.

I began this sermon by speaking of the contrast between Herod's feast and the one brought about by Jesus. I pointed out that Herod's feast was marked by murder when John the Baptist was executed. Jesus' feast also involves a death. It is the death of the Lord himself. He doesn't die here, but in order to bring about the eternal feast of heaven, the sin-bearer must die. He does so with the same heart of compassion he has in this passage.

CONCLUSION:

Will you join Jesus in the joy of his feast? He has given everything that you might do so. And he now invites you to give to him everything in order that your joy might be increased.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 14:13-21

1. Have you ever had an experience when you weren't sure where your next meal was going to come from? What was that like?
2. Heaven is frequently described in terms of a banquet. The book of Revelation describes the wedding supper of the Lamb. Why do you think this particular metaphor is an apt one to describe heaven? How is heaven like a feast?
3. Jesus' plans were interrupted by the presence of this large crowd. He intended to get away for a time of solitude and instead found this crowd awaiting his arrival, all making requests of him. Yet he was stirred to action by his compassion for them. What strikes you about Jesus' response of compassion when interrupted? How might your typical response to interruption be different than Jesus' response?
4. Compassion is an emotion. God, in the form of Jesus, feels something here deeply. Do you think of God as an emotional being? Do you find it comforting or attractive to think of him in that way? What would be lost if we didn't have a God with feelings?
5. We have the advantage of knowing how this story ends. The disciples, on the other hand, lived it out as it happened. Imagine how they must have felt when Jesus told them to feed this vast crowd. Has Jesus ever asked you to do something for which you felt completely inadequate and after which you withdrew and failed to do it?
6. The point was made in the sermon that it is not a matter of how much we have, even if it is only five loaves and two fish in the face of the needs of a large, hungry crowd. Rather, it's what we do with what we have. One application of this is to use it to fight the sin of envy. What does your battle with envy look like?
7. This passage encourages us to give what we have to Jesus. Is there something in your life where you are sensing God's tug to give it to Jesus?