

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Who has heard the story of the Feeding of the 5000 before this morning? That is absolutely wonderful! So what is the miracle in this story? (multiplying 5 loaves and 2 fishes to feed 5000 men *plus* women and children – probably somewhere between 10-12,000 in all). That is pretty amazing! But let's put that answer on the back burner, and reconsider this story, digging in a little deeper.

It begins with Jesus being told the grisly news of the violent and pointless beheading of his cousin, John the Baptizer, at a feast thrown by King Herod. John had been telling Herod that Herod's intimate relationship with his own brother's wife and her daughter, was not lawful (according to the Law of Moses). This infuriated both Herod *and* his brother's wife, and Herod had John imprisoned, just to shut him up. On Herod's birthday, Herod has a feast, and at this feast, he is enthralled with his niece's alluring dance. To reward her, he pompously promises her, in front of all of his guests, anything she wants. After consulting with her mother, she asks for John the Baptist's head, literally, served up on a platter. Despite Herod's hatred of John, Matthew writes that Herod was "distressed" by the request. But in order to save face in front of all his guests who heard his promise, he orders it done. She gets her wish. John's head is brought to her on a platter, which she then presents to her mother. Can you imagine anything more revolting? John's disciples are then allowed to bury his body. Then they go to tell Jesus what had happened.

Today's reading begins right when Jesus' hears the horrible news. Is anyone surprised to read that, upon receiving it, Jesus needed to go off and be alone for a while -- to grieve and, I suspect, to weep, and to pray?

But crowds of people, both the hopeful and the simply curious, not having heard about this tragedy, learn where he is and come, literally, by the thousands. They bring their sick and suffering loved ones and friends, hoping for healing, or at the very least, comfort.

What does Jesus do? Here, perhaps, is the first miracle. In the first century, people didn't believe that the gods really cared about ordinary people. The gods were considered to be detached, aloof, and were described in such warm and fuzzy terms as "The Unmoved Mover." Or, to the other extreme, the gods of the Greek and Roman empires were believed to be practical jokers, using human beings as playthings, controlling us and what happened to us based simply on their whims. At best, they took the sides of the rich and powerful. They were *not* known for siding with the oppressed, or for having anything close to compassion for the poor, the sick, and the hungry. They just couldn't be bothered with that.

So, long *before* Jesus feeds them, the hospitality and compassion the people see and experience in Jesus is, truly, miraculous. Instead of tending to his own needs, he spends whatever is left of the day taking care of *them*. But that's only the beginning. As evening comes, and it is clear these thousands of people have no intention of leaving, the disciples start worrying about supper. It's been a long day, and they are probably ready for a rest – not to mention getting Jesus some "alone time." So they come up with the brilliant idea, "Jesus, send them all away so they can go buy themselves something to eat."

First of all, these are *poor* people, in a land and a time where most people were hungry, where poverty was rampant. They had gathered in a deserted place – there were no McDonalds or Rafferty's or Dairy Queens out there. Given the likelihood that they didn't even *have* money enough to buy something to eat, shooing them away to go buy themselves something to eat is ludicrous. And Jesus says no.

So here's the next miracle – instead of showering down manna, bread, fish from heaven upon the people, Jesus uses his *disciples*, the ones who are just *not getting it again*, to tend to the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children.

When you think about, what's so miraculous about Jesus feeding all of these people from 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish? This is the God who created universes out of *nothing*. This is the God who created light from darkness, who created the land and the seas, the wheat and the fish – all out of nothing -- to begin with. Multiplying some bread and fish

is really no big deal for God/Jesus.

But the disciples are thinking out of a framework of *scarcity*, while Jesus thinks and acts in terms of *abundance*. Whatever their disappointment in not being able to just send everyone home and call it a day, whatever their skepticism that Jesus can really pull this off, they distribute what little they have and, rather than just observing *Jesus* do this, *they participate themselves* in the wonder that “all ate *and were full*,” and that the leftovers were more than they had started with.

I have seen this particular miracle continue so many times over so many years... I cannot tell you how the servers (usually, but not always, the women of the congregation) of so *many* funerals lunches have been miracles themselves to sad and grieving people. They take their best, educated guess at how many will stay to eat, and prepare accordingly. Even when significantly *more* people end up staying and eating, they never run out of food! It happened here yesterday. And in one congregation I served, we did the funeral of a very elderly lady who had died. The family wasn't expecting more than 25 people to stay for lunch. They, and the women in the kitchen, were *shocked* when, after 30 people had been through the line, there were easily 25 more. They had prepared a little extra, just in case, but not twice as much as they thought they would need. And you know what? Everyone ate. *Everyone* had a satisfying lunch. Most of them never even knew of the near disaster of running out of food.

I don't know how those women did it, I truly don't; but afterwards I went into the kitchen, looked at each one, shook my head and said, “However you did that, thank you for working so closely with God today. He used you in one of the most powerful ways I've ever personally witnessed.” Big smiles all around.

So as I see it, those are the real miracles of this morning's account of the Feeding of the 5000-plus-women-and-children: 1) that Jesus demonstrated God's passionate, unconditional love for ordinary people, suffering people, anxious people; a God who truly cares about their needs, and works to bring new life out of desperate situations; that people weren't just playthings of uncaring, spoiled children-like gods. And 2) that in having the bumbling, self-preoccupied disciples do it rather than doing it himself, they

participated as Jesus' own hands and feet in fulfilling God's will for the people gathered there.

There are miracles continuing all around, and God in God's wisdom often uses us to perform them, sometimes in ways which might seem totally insignificant to us, but which bring someone in need the assurance that God has not abandoned them.

And now we gather at another meal of Jesus' providing. As we eat and drink *this* meal, this "feast of victory for our God," Jesus shares his very self with us in the bread and wine. He assures us that he is not only with us, but he loves to live *in* us, to comfort, encourage, and strengthen us; to equip us to be his hands and feet wherever it is we find ourselves. I think you'll agree with me: If *that* isn't a miracle, I don't know what is. Amen.

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