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“All Ate and Were Filled”

Matthew 14:13-21

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Before we come to our passage in Matthew 14, we need to know what has just happened. Earlier in the chapter, John the Baptist was killed. King Herod Antipas, son of the so-called Herod the Great, the one who ordered all male babies killed around the time of Jesus’ birth, called for John’s head. At Herod’s lavish birthday celebration, he offered his step-daughter and grand-niece (there just weren’t that many branches on the Herod family tree) any gift she desired. The girl’s mother whispered in her daughter’s ear, “I want John the Baptist’s head.” John had been preaching an unpopular word, in some circles, about repentance and against infidelity and incest. His sermons were not well-received by Herod’s wife – who also happened to be Herod’s niece.

So, earlier in Matthew 14, John’s life ended violently, and his death had been celebrated at a birthday party rife with overabundance and gluttony. It sets a stark contrast to the very different kind of meal on a hillside that follows.

So, it is important for us to know the sad news Jesus just received when we come to our passage. He just heard that his good friend, his cousin and mentor is dead. Jesus would not have been the only one to have heard this gruesome news. We are told in our passage that the crowds had also heard. The people are understandably frightened and they’re seeking Jesus for comfort and guidance.



Matthew 14:13-21. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' ¹⁶Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' ¹⁷They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' ¹⁸And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

I recently watched the National Geographic mini-series, "A Small Light,"ⁱ based on the story of Miep Gies, friend and employee of Otto Frank who helped him, his family, and 4 other Jews live in hiding for over two years in Amsterdam during the Holocaust. Some of the scenes recount all that Miep had to do to find food for these eight people, without shopkeepers and butchers catching onto how many people she was trying to feed. Without enough ration books, she had to make up stories of visiting family members and strategically coordinate her shopping throughout different neighborhoods on different weeks. What one might assume was just a large grocery run was actually hours and hours of work on foot and bicycle every day, shopping in small bunches, so she was never seen carrying large grocery bags. In her diary, Anne Frank wrote, "Miep is just like a pack mule, she fetches and carries so much. Almost every day she manages to get hold of some vegetables for us [and] brings everything in shopping bags on her bicycle."ⁱⁱ

During their 25 months in hiding, food was precious. Wartime shortages meant that meat was a rarity, and the residents of the Annex often ate the same food for weeks. For days on end, it was either spinach, chicory, lettuce, or beans. Anne writes in her diary of sauerkraut for lunch and dinner, yuck.

It wasn't long before all other average citizens in Amsterdam were feeling the food shortages. By the end of the war, most people were trying to make soup out of anything and often went to bed hungry.

It's hard for many of us to relate, I imagine, but the folks on that hill in Matthew's miracle story would have been familiar with the feeling of empty bellies. They were colonized peasants. Overworked, underpaid, and malnourished. These men, women, and children knew the agony of an empty table.



The hour was late, people were no doubt hungry, but no one in the crowd, besides the disciples, is grumbling for food. The people aren't asking Jesus for anything. They just want to be with him. He is so different from any leader they had ever seen before. They are hungry, they are frightened, they are hurt—and they hang on Jesus' every word and action. He has shown them something special. He has given them a glimmer of hope. And he has shown them that the character of the God he reveals can be captured in one word: compassion. Jesus knows how the people are feeling. John is gone, and they are sad and likely afraid. Even in the midst of his own sadness, he reaches out and heals their sickness. He spends the day in conversation with them. He chooses to feed them.

In first century Galilee, gods aren't supposed to care about these kinds of people. The gods of ancient philosophers aren't supposed to care about humans at all. They are supposed to be dispassionate and removed from what is happening on earth down below. Greek and Roman gods are notorious for using people as playthings and ordering the world according to their whims. They take the side of the rich and powerful. They definitely are NOT known for siding with the oppressed, the ordinary, the downtrodden, and hungry.

Yet, this God does care. A God who cares: this is the first real miracle in the scene.

The next miracle is just *who* Jesus chooses to use. He had been doing miraculous things all day, healing the sick and caring for the poor. What is amazing here is that he doesn't choose to go about this action alone. At this point in the Gospel, the disciples still have their proverbial training wheels on, so to speak, as Matt Skinner describes them. But, like a good teacher, Jesus turns the question on them. "You give them something to eat." This is the second miracle in the story, really, that Jesus *uses* ordinary people, the disciples. So, it is not just about what Jesus does, but what the disciples are invited to do.

There are two marks of discipleship we see here in this scene: *compassion* (like their God shows compassion) and the sense, the vision for *possibility* in the midst of little. Jesus sees the potential of these imperfect, ordinary, doubting men.

Herod's kingdom is a kingdom of scarcity. In Herod's Kingdom, you are either "in" or you are "out." The whole structure is meant to keep most people out so that he can maintain power and authority. And yet, man preaching against sin and infidelity like John out in the wilderness was enough to make a powerful man like Herod nervous.



Martin Niemoller, a German Lutheran pastor who heroically opposed Adolf Hitler, was a young man when he met with Hitler as part of a delegation in 1933. Niemoller simply watched and listened to the soon-to-be-fuhrer from his spot at the back of the room. When he went home that night he told his wife, “I discovered Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Herod was a terribly frightened man. He had succumbed to the myth of scarcity. We know a little bit about what that’s like, those of us who lived through the grocery store and toilet paper runs of 2020. We know what it’s like to be afraid we don’t have enough—enough money, enough possessions, enough control—and our problem is that like the 12 disciples we suffer from a case of amnesia. We forget what God can do. We forget what God has offered. We forget the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and we worry about tomorrow.

The disciples say: The hour is late, and we have nothing to feed them. Like the disciples, we notice the limitations. We worry that we are not equipped, or we do not have enough. We know this feeling pretty well. We know the familiar feeling of keeping up and the fear of being overwhelmed. And we forget. We revert to the thinking that we have to have it all or do it all ourselves, forgetting the expanse and freedom promised by God. We can be so paralyzed by anxiety that we forget the thousands of times that God entered in and made a way when there seemed no way.

There were a lot of people claiming to do miracles in Jesus’ day. The difference in this miracle—the difference in this bounty and grace—is *who* it is directed toward. What the miracle is here is not necessarily the increasing loaves (though they are amazing), but the radical shift in *who* the disciples are called to be. “YOU give them something to eat ...”

There are 12 baskets remaining—12. One enough for each disciple.

This bizarre banquet in the middle of nowhere is so different from the feast that Herod prepares. Eating until you are filled is so different from the world Rome allows.

Matthew describes what happens when you move from scarcity—“*we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish*”—to abundance—“*thank you, God, for these loaves and fish.*” The disciples, despite whatever their initial skepticism or doubt might have been, are caught up in Jesus’ words of abundance and gratitude. They distribute what they have, and they participate in the joy that “all ate and were filled.”

This story was an old favorite of the early church, told over and over again. The folks on that hill? Matthew never tells us if they even realize a miracle has occurred. But for the early church looking



back in on it—the miracle was clear. It captured the essence of Jesus, the compassionate, loving Son of God. It captured the essence of God’s abundant grace and generous gifts to us, with 12 baskets left over—one for each disciple to carry. It captured the essence of our lives, who having seen the miracles of God, day after day, all around us, we still doubt and wonder if this will be enough.

It can be hard for us to imagine what one ordinary disciple, or what an ordinary group of disciples can do. The need is so great, the problem is overwhelming, the trouble too big—and we are so few. But Jesus showed the disciples, Jesus shows us, how to move from scarcity (“We have only five loaves and two fish.”) to abundance (“Thank you, God, for five loaves and two fish.”).

Decades after the war, whenever speaking to schools and at public gatherings, Miep Gies always closed her presentations with the same line. Any of us, “even an ordinary secretary or a housewife or a teenager can within [our] own small ways, turn on a small light in a dark room.”

God can take a small gift, a small light, a small meal, 5 loaves and 2 fish, and make it multiply. As Matthew reminds us, “All ate and were filled.”

And the miracle continues...

- When a child donates his lemonade stand money to the PCC;
- When a college-grad puts a high-paying job on hold to Teach for America;
- When a woman uses her vacation time to chaperone other people’s children on a youth mission trip.
- When a man has his lunch at an elementary school cafeteria and shows third graders what it means to care and show up.

God is still at work performing miracles through disciples. God gives us power to work for good in the world. When Jesus told the disciples to feed the 5,000 men, plus women and children, they thought it was impossible. The needs were so great and the resources so few. But Jesus then takes what we have, he blesses it, he breaks it, and he gives it.

The promise is that God will be with us, blessing us. It is not a promise of the absence of struggle or pain—even Jesus knew the grief of losing someone he loved; even Jesus had to go the way of the cross. It is a promise that God will be with us—the God of compassion and the God of possibilities is all around us.

Somehow, it is more than enough.



ⁱ “A Small Light,” National Geographic, 2023. Disney+.

ⁱⁱ “Miep Gies,” www.Annefrank.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brueggemann, Walter. “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity”, *Christian Century*, 1999.

