

Insufficient, But Enough

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Texts: Matthew 14: 13-21

Before we hear this morning's gospel reading from Matthew, let me say a word about its narrative context. Just before this passage, Jesus has learned of the brutal execution of his teacher and mentor, John the Baptist. And in the Gospel of Luke, it is just after this event that Jesus anticipates the possibility of his own death. Now, the Gospel reading for today:

Feeding the Five Thousand

14:13 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. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When 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.' 16 Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' 17 They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' 18 And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' 19 Then 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. 20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Will you pray with me: May you speak from your heart to our hearts, O God, that we may know the miracle of your abiding love. Amen

Come with me for a few minutes now into the strange world of miracles: feeding 5000 men, women and children besides.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand appears in all four gospels, so it's important we take it seriously. Seriously but not literally. This is not a factual account of a supernatural miracle in which scarcity is transformed into abundance for all. It's an allegory. And to hear what it might say to us, we need to take it not literally but seriously. So, what's it's about?

John has just been brutally murdered for daring to hold power accountable. Herod's wife Herodias manipulated her husband on the occasion of his birthday to offer her John's head on a platter. The blithe contempt of the powerful.

So how do we human beings respond to heart-breaking disappointments? We may withdraw and try to get some perspective on what's happened. Or we may reach out and join others to find a way forward.

The scene opens with Jesus doing the first: he withdrew...in a boat to a deserted place by himself. At the very same time, people from villages all around began to seek out John's protégé, this young Jesus of Nazareth. Men left their farms and shops, but not just men—women and children, whole families, left home to find hope and direction to something better.

And here's what we might call a miracle of humanity. You know how in a bad situation there are those people who, in spite of their own pain, reach out to comfort and support others. That's our brother Jesus: he comes ashore; there's a growing crowd; and instead of turning around and withdrawing, he responds with compassion. Not just compassion for a crowd. He especially reaches out to touch and heal those in greatest need.

And so, the day goes. People keep coming and coming. The disciples must have been thrilled—what a great moment. Tragedy turning into victory. But, as they say, be careful of what you wish for. The day is growing late. They're in a deserted place. And here's a massive crowd of men, and by the way, women and children besides.

So, the disciples do what only makes sense: send the crowds away so that they may go to the villages to buy food for themselves. Of course, it makes sense—but it's also a little too facile.

When our compassion's exhausted, our common-sense solutions may be about protecting ourselves from what we can't face anymore. "Sure, send them to the local Whole Foods to pick up some take-out on the way home."

At this point, Jesus' compassion borders on the ridiculous. "No," says our brother Jesus: The need not go away; you give them something to eat. Aw, come on: you may embody unlimited compassion; but this isn't how the world works. We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. You must be kidding, right?

Actually, we can identify with these first disciples and their impossible situation. We are called to compassion and to seek justice:

compassion for one another in need;

justice for our fellow human beings enduring unimaginable suffering;

making reparations for centuries of slavery and systemic racism.

And what do we really have, but a few loaves and fish. So, either we too are in a situation of absurd impossibility, or we need a miracle ourselves.

Let's listen to the story again. We may be getting close to a miracle.

Jesus said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

What's the miracle here? Remember, we're taking this seriously but not literally: we're setting aside the supernatural turning of material scarcity into abundance. And there's one other understanding I'd like to set aside: the hidden lunch theory. The idea that the disciples' generosity inspired others to generously share their provisions, until everyone took out their hidden sharing inspired generous sharing, until everyone shared their food; all were fed, with left-overs. It may be true that generosity can inspire generosity—but that dodges the problem. So, what then?

We've all come up against it: that experience of insufficiency. Not inadequacy—insufficiency.

You and I are not inadequate. And we need to be careful that our self-expectations don't make us see ourselves that way. We are gifted human beings. Gifted but limited. So, we can find ourselves in situations where what we have to offer is insufficient:

this challenge at work is more than I can handle.

this conflict in our family is too difficult to work through.

this illness is not going to be healed.

this global warming is not going to stop.

In these situations, we cannot help feel our limitations. We're not inadequate. But we're certainly insufficient.

So, where's the miracle? Perhaps just this:

to take what we do have,

to offer it up to God each day,

to be freed from fear we're not enough,

and to do what we can in love—

trusting that in God's economy, no act of love is ever wasted.

The story tells us one more thing: and all that ate that day were filled. Filled...Filled with abundance for a single day? Filled with a political transformation that turned oppression into justice for all? Filled with the promise that to trust in God is to be spared the difficulties of life. No, I don't think that any of those things are the real miracle here.

The real miracle is to be filled with assurance that something greater and abiding and loving is present in and with each and every one of us. That is the miracle that makes this day, and every day, a new day.

Today, we come to the communion table to receive a small piece of bread and sip of juice. And through these very insufficient gifts, may we each be filled with the assurance that the God of Jesus is with and within us, no matter what, and our own limited gifts are not merely insufficient:

They are offerings of love to the One who is eternally loving and forever present with us. And in God's economy, no act of love is ever wasted.

Amen