

Matthew 14:13-21 ¹³ Now when Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist, 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. And 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 All ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ Those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Matthew 14:13-21

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"We Have Nothing But..."

Rev. Amy Terhune

"Charles Swindoll tells a funny story about a nine-year-old named Danny who came bursting out of Sunday school like a wild stallion. His eyes were darting in every direction as he tried to locate either mom or dad. Finally, after a quick search, he grabbed his Daddy by the leg and yelled, "Man, that story of Moses and all those people crossing the Red Sea was great!" His father looked down, smiled, and asked the boy to tell him about it.

"Well, the Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. So the Jews ran as fast as they could until they got to the Red Sea. The Egyptian Army was gettin' closer and closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie and told the Israeli Air Force to bomb the Egyptians. While that was happening, the Israeli Navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross over. They made it!

"By now old dad was shocked. "Is THAT the way they taught you the story?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Danny admitted, "but if I told you the way they told it to us, you'd never believe it, Dad."

With childlike innocence the little guy put his finger on the pulse of our sophisticated adult world... [5 ¶s from "Our Lord's Abundant Table" by Brett Blair, www.Sermons.com.] A fantastical movie-like plot from *Mission Impossible* or *James Bond* is, if not believable, at least digestible. But bending the rules of nature? What do we do with that?

It never ceases to amaze me that some people just have to have an explanation. Was it a "Stone Soup" kind of situation, reminiscent of the old fable, where one person was generous and others were inspired to be generous too? I like the sentiment. Generosity can be contagious. And after all, sharing generously is the part of our human nature that proves we are created in God's image. We're meant to give and to share. It's the best part of who we are. There are plenty of times when I didn't share and lived to regret it, but not once have I regretted the times I did share. So I like the sentiment, but it doesn't explain what happened in today's lesson.

Or maybe everyone just took a little bit. Or maybe, given that Matthew was a Jew, it was important to him to show how Jesus fulfills the ancient prophecies and fits into the story of the Jewish People. Feeding multitudes in the dessert with fish and bread should remind us of the Exodus story,

when people were fed in the desert with manna from heaven and quail in their camp. And don't miss Matthew's language. It's evening, they're sitting, Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives it to the disciples. All eat. That's communion language there – you're going to hear it again in just a short while when we celebrate the sacrament.

All of this is to say that the story is layered with meaning, and none of them necessarily exclude any of the others. More important than explaining the miracle is understanding its importance. This moment in Jesus' ministry is one of a very few that is related in all four gospels. That means it was widely told and deeply meaningful to the earliest Christians. It also means there's a high probability that it's true. Somehow, Jesus fed crowds in the wilderness. Our need to explain it may say more about us than the scripture itself. The point of the story of feeding of the five thousand is not to prove that miracles happen. The point of the story is to teach us something about how God works in this world.

Remember that as this story opens, Jesus has just learned of the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. And he needs some time. He gets in the boat and goes in search of some solitude, some prayer time, a breather. But the crowds figure it out and walk around the lake to meet him on the other side. And the text says that Jesus had compassion on them. Had it been me, I would have been annoyed, put out, frustrated. Aagghh! Can't I get a break? But Jesus sees a need. "This is where the story of miracles always begins—in Jesus' compassion for people. Jesus sees a multitude of people who are hungry. Jesus sees a man blind from birth. Jesus sees a man who is lame, another with leprosy and Jesus has compassion for them. Compassion means to "feel with" another. Jesus feels our pain—is aware of our hurt. He sees our need." [from "Where are your Chickens? By King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

There's a story from *Reader's Digest* sometime back about a family driving out to see the Grand Canyon. The kids got to fighting or messing around in the backseat, as kids will often do on a trip, and one thing led to another. Before long, 5-year-old Zena's favorite pink blankie went flying out the window and was lost in the wind and dust of the highway. Zena, of course, was devastated – she loved that blanket like Linus loves his. As she sobbed, there were ominous threats from mom and dad for Zena's siblings. They stopped for lunch at a rest stop an hour or two later, all of the children sulking— Zena because she'd lost her blankie, and the others because they'd been punished for fighting. As they sat there dejectedly eating their sandwiches, a biker gang pulled into the rest stop.

One of the bikers got off his Harley, and lumbered over towards Zena's family. His leather jacket was zipped up to his throat, but he couldn't hide the tattoos that peeked out, one that went up to his ear, and another that went down across the back of his hand. His hair was long and black, as was his beard, and he had to be well over six feet tall. Chains rattled against a big silver belt buckle as he approached. "Is that your blue Ford?" the huge man rumbled gruffly. Zena's Mom nodded reticently. The man unzipped his leather coat, and began to pull something from the inside pocket. Zena's mother tensed up with fear at first, and then realized that he was, in fact, extracting from that inner pocket the soft pink blankie her daughter so dearly loved. Zena spotted it instantly, and flung her little arms around that big old biker with reckless abandon, clinging to the blankie all the while. The man smiled, patted her a little awkwardly on the head, and returned to his bike. [2 ¶s adapted from Zena Hamilton, United Kingdom in *Reader's Digest*. Date/issue unknown, in illustrations for Matthew 14:13-21, www.Sermons.com.]

That Biker had eyes that saw things others might miss, and he cared enough to respond. In that moment, he was Christlike. Having eyes to see and ears to hear—that was important to Jesus. He stressed it. And he wants us to use them to see the needs and hear the silent cries of those around us. Miracles begin with the compassion of God, who feels our pain.

But I'll tell you what: it really helps if we give God something to work with. The disciples were feeling the same fatigue that Jesus probably did in the wake of his cousin's death. They want him to send the crowds away so they can at least eat in peace. But Jesus says, "You feed them." Now the different gospels report this each a little differently. In Matthew's text, the disciples simply state the facts: We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. In Mark and Luke, they kind of whine a little bit: are we supposed to go buy food for this many people? That would take 6 months of wages! In John, they actually commandeer some kids' lunch: there's a boy here with five loaves and two fish, but what's that among so many? In each case, the implication is: we don't have enough.

We have nothing but...

The disciples of Jesus were focusing on their problems - not their possibilities. Jesus told them to give the crowd something to eat and they said, "We have nothing but...." Nothing? Nothing! Theirs is a language of scarcity.

Several years ago, Eileen Egan reflected on her work with Mother Teresa and with the Missionaries of Charity for thirty years, and recalls: "One day, after my conservation had been filled with a litany of problems, Mother Teresa remarked, 'Everything is a *problem* with you. Why not use the word *Gift*?' With that began a shift in vocabulary. Shortly thereafter, we were to fly from Vancouver to New York City.

"I was dismayed to learn that the trip had to be broken en route, with a long delay, and was about to inform her of the *problem*. Then I caught myself and said, 'Mother, I have to tell you about a gift. We have to wait four hours here, and you won't arrive at the convent until very late.' Mother Teresa settled down in the airport to read a book of meditations, a favorite of hers.

"From that time on, items that presented disappointments or difficulties would be introduced as gifts" [3 ¶s adapted from Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 2000.]

Mother Teresa understood the power of reframing. She also knew that we do not follow a God of scarcity, but rather, of abundance. Gifts come disguised all the time. So maybe they didn't have much. Just some kid's lunch, but it was offered to Christ. And thousands of hungry people were fed. When we give God something to work with, God acts.

Several years back, I heard a young preacher named Zach Dunlap preach on this text, and all these years later, something he said still sticks with me. He said, "When Jesus took these loaves and fishes in his hands and lifted his eyes to heaven to bless them, I don't think he was thinking, "Boy, I sure hope this works." He trusted that God would provide, and he knew that God transforms enough into abundance if we give God something to work with.

With compassion, God sees others, God tends needs, God cares for the hurting. With faith and trust, God acts in the smallest thing. Ours is a God who multiplies and engenders fruitfulness, and who calls us to the same faith and trust. God works in the world through compassion and faith. To see others. To see possibilities. To see gifts and not problems This is the call on our lives.

The disciples didn't believe there was enough. But Jesus said, "bring it to me". That's where it really takes off. Bring it to me. You've got meager resources, bring it to me and I'll multiply it. You've got an idea, bring it to me and I'll help you hone it. You've got your doubts and your fears, bring them to me and I'll get you past them.

Give God something. Start small. Start with one. Start with what you have. And God will assuredly multiply it. Because God is not a God of scarcity. God is not finite. And the things that matter most in the world – things like hope, joy, peace, grace, love – these things aren't finite. God will multiply the resources we offer—the cash, the hope, the energy, the faith. All of it. When we have nothing but... Jesus... we have what we need. Amen.