

And All Were Filled Matthew 14:13-21

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The feeding of the five thousand is a marvelous story. The transformation of five loaves and two fish into enough food for 5,000 men with twelve full baskets left over is really nothing short of “miraculous.” This is even more extraordinary if you make that crowd 10-20,000 people when factoring in a spouse and 2.5 children for every one of those men. The numbers simply don’t add up, but the story delights children of all ages. How was it possible that all were filled on that day?

I have to say I was elated when I saw Matthew 14 as one of the lectionary readings for today knowing this would be Communion Sunday. How serendipitous is that: the sacrament of communion tied to a scripture that celebrates an abundance of bread and fish, a shared meal, fellowship, and caring for the entire community despite the disturbances of the surrounding world.

This must be an important story as it is found in all four Gospels. Stories that appear in all four is not too common. The feeding of five thousand resides in that select group with Christ’s baptism, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, several scenes from the trial and crucifixion, and finally the resurrection. Reading the parallel passages can be quite illuminating. The differences reveal points for consideration or add to the sequence of events for greater understanding depending on which parts of the story the author chooses to include.

Each time reading scripture a new nugget can capture one’s attention, a different word or phrase takes prominence, and a new perspective or principle emerges that brings new insight. What caught my attention this time was but Jesus’s actions accomplished against a tumultuous back story.

I ask you to consider more than just the obvious math discrepancy. In Matthew the miracle is preceded by a gruesome story, the beheading of John the Baptist. Remember him? Jesus’ cousin, who leaped in the womb of Elizabeth when she heard the voice of Mary, and the one who baptized Jesus. The head is delivered as requested by Herodias on a platter because of a promise given by Herod. (Note that Herodias is already Herod’s sister-in-law, and niece, and soon to be wife) What a soap opera. But I digress.

In a time honored and sacred act the body is retrieved and prepared for burial by his disciples. I find some ambiguity about whose disciples “his” disciples are. Are these followers of John, or Jesus’s disciples? It matters not. These friends came forward to care for the body of John the Baptist, to protect it, to honor their loved one, to bury him and deliver assistance to the family. Their next action as told by Matthew is “then they went and told Jesus.”

How can we possibly grasp the breadth of what Jesus might have been experiencing? What must it have been like for Jesus to receive news of John’s death? John, the one who prepared the way, his cousin, his colleague, fellow preacher and messenger of God’s Kingdom. What pain, loss, sadness and heartache.....

In Matthew's telling of these events; Jesus withdrew. Jesus boarded a boat. Jesus went to a deserted place.

The sea of Galilee is not a big body of water; hardly a sea at all measuring eight miles wide by thirteen miles in length. Having spent time traveling the northern end of the sea on a Holy Land trip with this church family, there is not much distance between places like Tabgha, Capernaum, or what is believed to be the location of Bethsaida where the feeding of the five thousand took place according to the Gospel of Luke. Imagining the crowds ability to follow Jesus' boat along the shoreline, at the very least spreading news of his location is not difficult.

He was not alone for the crowds followed. There was no respite, no time for bereavement. The people have been following Jesus throughout Galilee. Here is Jesus mourning his friend and cousin, but the crowds pursue him. Yet In the midst of grief and fatigue, Jesus managed to simultaneously model a rule for life; and gift the disciples important lessons that applied then, and still today.

For Jesus came ashore and had compassion for the sick among the crowds. He cared for and healed them. And when the disciples came to him in the evening concerned about the late hour and lack of food in the deserted area, doesn't it make sense to send the crowd away to town for sustenance? Obviously not to Jesus, for he replied "There is no need to send them away. You give them something to eat." What must the Disciples have thought in response to that? What would we be thinking? What would be our response? Would we distribute what we have or offer our own excuse?

Epworth and Carol choirs presented a musical titled "Table for Five.....Thousand!" written by Tom S. Long and Allen Pote several years ago. It's a charming retelling of feeding the 5,000 from a child's point of view. As a young boy and the disciples make their way through the crowds seeking donations to feed everyone they hear a variety of replies in the song appropriately titled "Excuses." Do any of these sentiments seem too familiar or produce any embarrassment where you live?

*We'd willingly hand out our wealth as soon as we have served ourselves.
I'm sure we'd share if we could see who else is giving food for free.*

*Before we give, why don't you ask us what we give the poor in taxes?
I would like a guarantee—what's in this giving thing for me?*

These statements wouldn't be so funny if there wasn't a bit of truth in every one of them. But Jesus – Jesus saves the day and models two things for us. One – we are called upon to provide compassion and hospitality when we may least feel like it, or it's inconvenient, maybe when we have made other plans. Taking care of the least, the last, the lost, the marginalized, the widow, orphan, those who are poor, naked.....hungry – this is our field of mission and service. Sharing Christ's love with those around us whether friend or stranger.

Don't get me wrong here. It does not mean to be a doormat, or dispensing so much compassion and hospitality we have given everything away and our souls are empty.

Two – Jesus models that sabbath or retreat is needed for all of us. Jesus does not get the break at the time he first wanted it, when he heard about John’s death. If you recall he withdrew, got on a boat, and went in search of a deserted place. I would have been looking for a place to grieve. But he was pursued. At the end of the day when all were filled Jesus then sends the disciples out on a boat, dismisses the crowds and retreats to the mountain by himself.

When all were filled.....that’s a monumental task. Because it means family, friends, neighbors, strangers, those near and across the sea, and ourselves. With many hands and loving hearts working together, we may be able to see beyond our own needs, caring for others. If we follow Jesus example, we can make a path, a start for all to be filled. And if every community or circle of friends did the same.....well then God’s kingdom will be truly thriving here on earth.

O Loving God, please let it be so. Amen.