



# “Miracle in the Meal”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

November 23, 2005

The gospel of Matthew has more accounts of miracles performed by the hand of Jesus than any of the other gospels, perhaps because Matthew enjoys Jesus' miraculous nature all together and the struggle of the disciples to understand and to believe what they are seeing and hearing in him. Our text today, the familiar feeding of the 5,000 passage, comes in Matthew just after the death of John the Baptist - whose head was brought out to king Herod on a platter during a great feast he was holding in his court and at the suggestion of the married woman the king was fooling around with, despite John's attempts at intervention. The grim festivities of this meal stand back to back and in stark contrast to the miracle account. The story of the 5,000 being fed, or a retelling of it, is the only miracle account to occur in all four gospels, and is repeated twice in two of them for a total of six hearings in the scriptures. Scholars don't know why it is repeated so many times other than for obvious emphasis. But I think it is safe to say that it is trying to tell us something about the person of Jesus and the nature of discipleship. Since the latter is what we so often take up in our Wednesday discussions, of the hundreds of viewpoints from which one could approach this text, we will focus on this one.

So our reading comes from the gospel of Matthew 14:13-21, just after the disciples told Jesus the news of John's death. "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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children."

Talk about being stressed out about the prospect of meal preparation. It is difficult enough worrying about the litany of Thanksgiving staples that have to be provided by tomorrow night, or the overwhelming crowds that will have to be fed perhaps in your home or in the home of a similarly stressed host. I made the mistake of going grocery shopping the day before Thanksgiving one year and let me tell you, I barely made it out with my life let alone my gallon of milk. But 5,000 people gathered there at the shore that day- actually that's just 5,000 men- the women and children have still not gained the status of full personhood in the mind of the author yet, so they are not counted. So, a conservative estimate might reveal that at least twice that many people flocked from their towns to the wilderness to hear Jesus teach and in hopes that he would heal the sick among them. As Mark tells it, the crowds were 'like sheep without a shepherd.' They were lost and hungry for something- but they didn't know what. Perhaps just to have their curiosity satisfied, but perhaps they longed for something more. Matthew just says that a crowd gathered, and Jesus, having shoved off the shore to be consumed by his own grief over the death of his friend John the Baptist in peace, had compassion on them. Literally, it means he suffered with them. How could the Lord and giver of life, the great shepherd, counselor, teacher, healer, and friend, see all that need standing on the shore and not reach out? The disciples were

pretty pleased with this, I would imagine. They probably had a lot of sympathy for him- John the Baptist was Jesus' minister- he baptized him- and he was his friend. His death really shook Jesus up and it should have- decapitated during the banquet of the king at the whim of a woman with an agenda to cover up their guilt... But now Jesus was doing what Jesus did best- teaching and healing- that stuff always drew a crowd and he was just so good at it. But that was Jesus' thing- there wasn't much the disciples could do to help with that so they could just slip to the sidelines and watch the miracle of Jesus just being Jesus happen. It was pretty incredible, really. But then when he gave the word and it was time for the people to go home, they could all go grab a bite to eat and sit around and process the day and listen to him tell stories about the kingdom of God. They took care of some of the details, but Jesus did most of the work.

But this particular day as the cool of dusk started to set in and their stomachs started to grumble a bit, Jesus didn't slow down, "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," the disciples suggested. Perhaps they were getting hungry, but the people were still lingering- they weren't dropping off for the night, and they sure hadn't packed a cooler with sandwiches for the road. They had just left their towns and followed him. But instead of calling it a night, Jesus turned to them and said what probably sounded worse than any, 'we were thinking we'd do Thanksgiving at your house this year' ever sounded. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." The gospel of Mark records that the disciples responded with a little startled sarcasm saying, "Are we to go and buy 200 denari worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" This would have bought about 1600 loaves of bread at the market in the city. So, needless to say, their realistic estimation of what it would take to feed this crowd was a bit of a stretch given their means at the moment. And even if they could afford it, it would have taken all night to make a meal of that magnitude happen. But Matthew omits this commentary and the disciples replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." It is more resignation and stunned disbelief that is in their voice in Matthew, but Jesus had said it with a straight face, so he must have been serious. And at his request they brought him the loaves and fish.

I wonder at what point the disciples thought Jesus had lost his mind. With such a monumental task before them, they had to have wondered what he could possibly have been thinking. They had certainly never been asked to do anything like this before and they were certainly not miracle workers. Jesus had healed people one on one to be sure, but feed a few thousand with a few loaves? That's a different story altogether. All this time with Jesus and they still didn't associate him with the manna from heaven that fed the Jews in exile for 40 years, or the cakes baked on hot stones by angels for the prophet Elijah. Jesus had broken bread and blessed it before, but that was no different than any other head of the household did. They didn't associate it with anything special, this was not the last supper but one among many. One that looked like a few thousand people were sure to go hungry at. How could they ever feed all these people? Can you imagine someone saying to you and your whole pew right now that fellowship hall is empty and you are responsible for providing lunch for all of us today right after worship. Or that you are to feed 5,000 people minimum in the next 20 minutes. I wonder if the people in the crowd itself were thinking the same thing. While I have great faith in each one of you, I think I'd be headed for the nearest hotdog stand if you'd been given that challenge. We aren't given any insight into their mood. Were they so hungry for the Word that they would have stayed there all night even if

it meant they starved, or were their stomachs also starting to rumble, the buffet was looking a little skimpy, the hosts were nervous, and it was a long walk home? How do you feed 5,000 people? How do you begin to tackle this gargantuan task?

In the week after hurricane Katrina hit, our Parish Nurse spent ten days in Biloxi, Mississippi where she worked as part of a Red Cross team doing triage and disaster recovery. One of the men she worked with, a fellow by the name of Greg Smith, shared one of his experiences during the weeks with their team by way of encouragement after some long and tremendously difficult days. He had met Erica at the First Baptist Church in McComb, Mississippi. She was a frail seven year old with beautiful dark skin and large eyes. She had not eaten or had anything to drink in the five days since Hurricane Katrina had demolished her family's house. She now lived safely in a small trailer with her parents and younger sister, though the trauma she had endured had left her with vivid nightmares in which her family and teachers were all being maimed or brutally killed by the storm, though they resided safely with her. She had lost all interest in playing or singing or eating. And so on this day they sat cross-legged on the floor of a building converted into a relief center. Busy workers bustled around them, a tired Red Cross worker who just wanted to see her eat, and a little girl who had lost everything but her family. "What's your favorite food in the whole world?" He asked. She sized him up with those big eyes for a moment, and he thought he detected a faint glimmer of a smile. "Fortune cookies," she chimed in. "I've got your number," he said. "Give me twenty minutes and I'll be back."

As luck would have it, he had just found a Chinese restaurant that had kept its doors open the day before. The hostess listened closely as he told her his story and immediately began hustling about, filling a large shopping bag with fortune cookies and dinners for Erica and her family and shoving it in his arms. As he pulled out his wallet to pay her, she pushed it away with tears streaming down her face and insisted he hurry back to the little girl who wouldn't eat. A few minutes later Erica and the man sat cross-legged on the floor once again. She peered disbelieving into the shopping bag, and slowly her eyes began to grow as big as saucers as the reality of the gift inside began to settle in. "Can you eat just one of these for me, right now?" He asked. The faint smile returned. "Yes." "Could I eat one with you?" "Yes." They munched happily. "Now how many of these do you think you can eat?" The little girl from New Orleans gave this some serious thought. "ALL of them," she said emphatically. "No way! You haven't eaten anything in five days!" He teased. More serious thought, eyes narrowing. "Well," she said slowly, "maybe not TODAY!" And for the first time since the storm her smile finally broke through.

The next day his team went back to the same restaurant to have lunch and to tell the hostess that she had helped make a difference in the life of the child. When she saw them the hostess ran out to her car, tears streaming down her face again, and much to their surprise, returned with bags and bags filled with gifts she had bought for Erica- clothes and toys, a hula hoop, and a huge bag of fortune cookies. The hunger of this child in the seemingly impossible task of helping her to rebuild her spirit motivated a miracle that not only filled her stomach, but transformed lives. Reflecting on his experience, Greg wrote, "Jesus calls us to minister. The (situation) is overwhelming and our personal response sometimes seems tiny and insignificant. But if we listen, we hear him telling us to go where he needs us ... and to deal with one small crisis at

a time. Much like Erica and her bag of fortune cookies, we may not be able to help thousands of people in one day. We can start with one fortune cookie and one little girl with dark skin and beautiful eyes and a smile as big as Louisiana. Jesus asks nothing more; he expects nothing less.”

Like the disciples who had to have watched in disbelief as their meager offerings continued to spread and spread and spread in their service to the hungry crowds by the blessing of Christ, it was not until every stomach was filled, or the hearts of a weary and weather-worn group on the gulf coast were satisfied that anyone realized that they had just experienced a miracle in their midst. That they had been called to play a part in God’s radical provision through the humble offerings of a willing and fearful few. It seems like a small thing that they had to give- not a feast by any stretch, just a couple of loaves and some fish for a few thousand hungry people. A bag full of fortune cookies to one starved and frightened soul. But look how these offerings were multiplied in the hands of God and see the miracle in the meal that is prepared by Christ and served up by the faithful. There is no telling how Jesus will find a way to feed his people. But to be a part of the miracle of God’s blessing, you have to be willing to step up to the table and recognize that the people are hungry. Hungry in their bodies. Hungry in their souls. It is their hunger that motivates miracles. Miracles that God is ready to perform but not before calling upon you and your hands to distribute the blessing that he has prepared.

And so you’d better be ready to do a little work even though you yourself are weary and hungry and tired after a long day. Because when you’ve been at it all day like the disciples and you cannot even fathom preparing a meal that will satisfy for lack of your own resources, or the breadth of the need, or depth of the hunger in the core of your own being or in that of those around you, when the task seems unimaginable and insurmountable and out of your league, what small gifts you may have to offer, in the hands of Christ, will be over and in abundance more than could ever possibly be needed. And will be multiplied for the work of the kingdom of God in ways that are beyond all that you could ever ask or imagine. It takes adjusting your eyes to God’s vision that sees beyond meager rations and into the hearts that they will fill. It doesn’t take a year’s worth of donated salary, or a degree in counseling, or culinary calisthenics like those required by our Thanksgiving feast, it takes just a few staples like bread and love handed over to Christ to use for his purposes. It takes not fearing the hunger. It takes showing up and looking for the ways in which God is inviting you to plug in to the work of his Spirit, who is busy multiplying loaves and looking for volunteers to help distribute the blessing. It is a difficult call for us disciples, but one worth giving thanks for as we are invited to participate in Christ’s saving, satisfying grace. How do you feed 5,000 hungry people? One at a time. Jesus said to the disciples of the hungry masses who lingered there longing for him, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” Jesus asks nothing more; he expects nothing less. Amen.