

Pentecost 7 2011 [PR 13]

Matt. 14:13-21 “Compassion & Abundance in Jesus”

The “Feeding of the 5000” is a powerful biblical story. Our questions regarding the miracle stories generally circle around the issue of their veracity. Did it really happen? Well the feeding of the 5000 is found in all 4 gospels. This tells us that it was an important event for the early church. Modern commentators have come up with 5 interpretations of this miracle. Some have attempted to explain-away the miracle by peeling away the layers of history to get at what “really” happened. What are those 5 interpretations?

#1 The “De-mythologizing Interpretation” says that Jesus didn’t really perform a miracle but rather shamed the people into sharing the food they were hiding in their cloaks by lifting up the example of a generous boy who gave his lunch to Jesus. (in John’s account)

#2 The “Sacramental Interpretation” sees in this miracle an exaggerated version of the sacrament of Holy Communion because the text uses the same words that are used in the communion liturgy, ... “He took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to the people.”

#3 The “Jesus as the second Moses” interpretation draws a parallel to the O. T. account of the Israelites wandering in the desert and how God fed them with the miracle of manna.

#4 The “Corruption and Compassion” interpretation draws a contrast between how King Herod used his kingly power to murder John the Baptist

and how Jesus had “compassion for the crowds, healed the sick and fed the multitudes.”

#5 Then there’s the “Stewardship Interpretation” that reminds us that whatever we bring to Jesus, he will bless and multiply for the work of his kingdom. No offering is too small for God to use. There will be enough and some to spare.

Which interpretation is correct? Each of them can teach us some element of truth and certainly we can learn from each of these various interpretations.

But let’s go back to the beginning of the story and see if this miracle is hiding something that speaks to us in a much more powerful way. We begin by looking at the setting. Jesus had just heard about the murder of John the Baptist. John was a relative of Jesus. His mother and John’s mother were related. So Jesus was hit with the news of a death in the family. Jesus felt the need to get away so he “withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart.”

When death strikes a loved one we too feel the need to “withdraw” for awhile. It is a natural human tendency to want to hide when we have been hurt, to protect ourselves, to deal with our feelings of loss. When someone we love dies we stop whatever we are doing to attend to the matters at hand. We take time off from work, cancel plans and focus our attention on dealing with the loss of a loved one. There was a death in the family of Jesus. He felt the same loss we feel when death takes someone we love. So Jesus wanted to get away. Get away from the crowds that followed him

everywhere he went. Get away from the demands of the people who came to him with their illness and trouble. Jesus needed to get away. So he got into a boat and sailed a few miles away to a lonely and uninhabited spot along the Sea of Galilee. Christians in the fourth century thought they had identified this spot and so they built a church on the site. The Arabs destroyed the church in the 7th century. Then in the 1980s it was re-discovered, excavated and rebuilt. The church is called “The Church of the Multiplication” and houses a 4th century mosaic on the floor depicting the miracle of feeding the 5000 with the loaves and fishes. Today Christian pilgrims from all over the world visit that church. When Jesus was there it was a lonely place. But the crowds followed him. He couldn’t get away. Here we see the first miracle. It is ...

“The Miracle of Compassion”

Jesus, tired though he was and in need of solitude, “**had compassion on them, and healed their sick.**” Jesus continued to heal the hurts of others even when he was hurting himself. That’s the first miracle. What this tells us is that Jesus is there for you. When you are lost, sad, alone and in need, Jesus is there for you. He has compassion for you.

The Christian religion is the most “earthly” and “materialistic” of all religions. Christianity is not a vague “spirituality”. Christianity is incarnational, it has real flesh and bone and is concerned with real human needs, like hunger and health and life and death. Jesus had compassion on them and healed the sick. His compassion was more than just feelings of pity. He fed the hungry with real food until they were satisfied. The words, “healed” and “satisfied” are wonderful words. The sick were healed and the hungry crowds were satisfied. That God cares for us is amazing. It’s the

first miracle, the miracle of compassion! But there's a second miracle illustrated here. It is...

“The Miracle of Prayer”

Let's look at not just the mechanics of the event but the theology underlying the event. Jesus prayed. People often say, “Prayer works”. But isn't prayer that works....it is God who works when we pray. God hears your prayers. Jesus set a good example in his prayers. In a busy world where your spouse doesn't listen to you, your children don't listen to you, even the dog doesn't listen to you...God listens! God listens to your prayers. Jesus set an example of prayer in giving thanks to God for the gift of every meal, even a very meager meal. When you pray before meals you are doing much more than saying “Thank You” to God for your food. You are reminding yourself and your children of your relationship to God. You are reminding yourself and your children that God gives you daily bread and all that you need for life. This simple discipline of thanking God for your food is a daily reminder of your relationship with God. Our prayers focus our attention on God as the provider of all needs in life. God is the God of life and when you give thanks at every meal you remember that your life depends on God. Jesus prayed before he broke the bread and gave it to the hungry and they were satisfied. That's the next miracle. It is

“The Miracle of Abundance”

The crowds were hungry but it appeared that all the food available amounted to only a couple of fish and 5 loaves of bread. So little for so many. But they forgot that they were with Jesus! Dr. Frederick Dale Bruner in his commentary on this text writes, “[When you are faced with overwhelming need and underwhelming resources you need to look to Jesus for help.](#)”

(Bruner p. 531). With Jesus there is enough and more to spare. We learn from this miracle story that in following Jesus we will see the miraculous. We often don't see the miracles of compassion or the miracles of faith that come from daily prayer. We don't see the miracles of healing because we've become so enamored with the tools of medicine that we forget that God is the "great physician". So Jesus gives us a miracle we can see in the feeding of the 5000. Jesus takes a very little and multiplies it for the benefit of many.

Too often we look at life from the perspective of "scarcity" rather than to look at life and the blessings of God from the perspective of "abundance". God has given you the days and years of your life. What an abundant blessing! God has given you abilities and talents to use. He calls you to use them to be a blessing to others! God has given you faith! He calls you to use it to point others to Jesus by your words and deeds. Xians should never say "I don't have enough resources or talents to do what God has called me to do...or... I don't have strong enough faith to be a witness." Remember the miracles from today's lesson, The Miracle of Compassion, The Miracle of Prayer, The Miracle of Abundance.

But all of these miracles are dependent upon the greatest miracle of all. It was the miracle of ...

"The Presence of Jesus"

The disciples only had 5 loaves and 2 fish and there were thousands of people. But they were with Jesus and by giving what they had to Jesus, for his blessing, it became enough to spark a miracle.

The miracle of feeding the 5000 is more than just a miracle of bread for hungry people. It is a miracle that points you to God's abundant grace which overflows your expectations, overwhelms you with his presence and satisfies your needs. This grace is seen in the abundant provision of God. There are many miracles in this story. The miracle of compassion, the miracle of healing, the miracle of prayer, and the miracle of abundance. But it is Jesus himself who is the greatest miracle of all and for this greatest miracle we give God thanks and praise. Amen.