

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 14:13-21

When Enough is Enough

Our gospel readings are moving on – from Jesus’ parables to Jesus miracles. Now as we do that I think it’s important that we acknowledge something. Miracles are, for many of us, a struggle.

I mean, we’re modern people, right? People steeped in science, people steeped in skepticism and cynicism. And for people like that, miracles are – kind of a problem. What do we do with them? Do we accept them at face value – yes, God intervened in the laws of nature in this time and place in a way that none of us have ever seen God intervene in our lifetime.

Do we explain them away? Well, what REALLY happened in this case was that the people in the crowd actually DID have bread of their own, and when they saw Jesus and the disciples offering to share their food it inspired them to the same kind of generosity, so much so that there was more than enough food to go around.

Those of us who have been in the church all or most of our lives may not think about it all that much and just sort of let these stories go by, but I can tell you, for people OUTSIDE the church, people who don’t have any kind of faith – these stories are a stumbling block – a reason for some to dismiss religion all together.

So what is this story? It an account of a supernatural event, or not?

Or maybe that’s the wrong question? Maybe the question is: Why, as they are trying to bring people to faith, did the gospel writers include these stories of miracles, or “signs” as they often called them.

The obvious explanation, of course, is that they included these supernatural events to prove that Jesus was who he said he was – the Son of God. I mean, what else could these miracles mean, what other proof do you need?

The only problem with that explanation is that it isn't true. There were other miracle workers in Jesus' time. If you look at histories of the ancient world you'll find accounts of all kinds of miracles

We all know that the disciples performed miracles in Jesus name, but Luke's gospel and the book of Acts refer to other miracle workers. The disciples even ask Jesus about them – what to make of them – and he basically says leave them alone – if they aren't against us their with us.

Other historians of the time refer to several other miracle workers by name. My own personal favorite is a guy known as "Honi, the Circle Drawer" – evidently that's one of the things he could do – draw a perfect circle, but he could also cure the sick and at least on one occasion raised the dead. In fact if you dig through the accounts of these other miracle workers every miracle Jesus does in any of the gospels was done by someone else.

Except this one. Feeding the multitudes. 5,000, or however many there were counting women and children. It's unique.

Another think to note - the feeding of a multitude is the ONLY miracle reported by all four gospels. So many other things are left out of one gospel or another: Jesus' birth only shows up twice, even the last Supper is only in three gospels. But this miracle – every writer takes the time to include it. Matthew thinks it so important he two almost identical stories.

That should get our attention - Why this story? What is so important about it? What does it reveal about God, about Jesus, about who we are called to be in the world? Why did all the

evangelists think about this and say, “Hey. Now *that* story is definitely worth remembering.”

Of course, there's the obvious answer: this is a pretty awesome miracle. Especially in Jesus time!

Matthew tells us that everyone “ate until they were full.” That isn’t a big deal to us. We eat until we’re full pretty regularly, and when we don’t it’s often because we’re trying to lose weight because we’ve eaten to the point of being full too many times in the past.

But that was not at all the case for people in Jesus’ time. The majority of people in Jesus time struggled on a daily, or at least a seasonal basis for adequate food and nutrition. There were small groups of ruling wealthy who enjoyed abundant variety and good quality of food. But most of the population lived around, at, or below subsistence level. They knew what it was like to not eat all day and go to bed hungry. That’s why the Lord’s prayer asks God for “our daily bread” – which means enough bread to get me through the day (6:11). It wasn’t something to be taken for granted.

It is also one of the reasons we see so many sick people in the gospels. Diseases of deprivation (caused by inadequate nutrition) and diseases of contagion (caused by inadequate immunity made worse by poor nutrition) were common.

But here a whole crowd “eats until they are full”, in a time when most people are hungry. In the wilderness – a place where there is nothing. Yet God provides.

We’re so used to having our needs met – EXPECTING our needs to be met, that sometimes we forget that being provided for and having our needs met really IS a miracle.

Of course Jesus is not just providing for the crowd, he is also providing a lesson for his disciples. There is a sense that this story here to tell us something about discipleship. It’s an invitation

to action and involvement, a testimony that discipleship is not just about believing and following but also means participating. They pass out the food, they collect the leftovers, and in the process they get a glimpse of what they and the rest of the church will be called to do in the future.

And Jesus signals this with one pointed phrase, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Don't make them take care of themselves, you do it.

One of the things you might notice about this story is a way that it is different from the stories in the other gospels. Did you notice: there is no "little boy" in this story. It's not his lunch the disciple share with the crowds, it's their own. They say "WE have only five loaves and two fish" That's all we have, Jesus – not enough.

Jesus says – turn it over to me, and it will be enough. And he makes it so.

How? Notice, text really doesn't say. Matthew doesn't bother to clear it up, and frankly I'm sort of glad he doesn't. Yes, something miraculous happens here in the presence of Jesus. What the miracle DOES is more important than how it does it.

I think the meaning of the miracle is more important than the miracle itself. It comes back to Jesus when he says "you do it." Jesus is saying to his disciples, "You can't sit back and watch me do all this awesome stuff. I am counting on you. I need you. I know you don't think you can, I know you don't think you have the gifts you need - but trust me – use the gifts you have – share them – I'll make sure they are enough."

The disciples are thinking linearly. Practically. "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." Think about that though – the acknowledge that they are in a deserted place? Where will the food come from?

What they are really saying is – “It’s late, Jesus, and it’s time to go home. We are done here. What more do you want? Come on, Jesus. these people need to fend for themselves.”

But instead Jesus takes what they have, and makes it enough – more than enough – enough to fill everyone present and 12 baskets left over. One for each disciple. Enough to feed them, and to give them plenty to continue to share.

This is a major lesson in discipleship, Discipleship 101, to be exact. That’s Matthew’s whole purpose in writing his gospel, to teach people how to be disciples, how to participate in the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. It begins from the Sermon on the Mount and goes out from there- God’s kingdom is here – a kingdom with new rules, a kingdom of abundance – now act like citizens of it!

The thing is, Discipleship is isn’t practical in any conventional sense. We will never completely know what is or is not possible. We will never have all the answers to our questions. We will never feel adequate to the challenges that the world around us presents us with.

But if we follow Jesus, if we trust him, what we can learn is what the Disciples did : whatever we may feel we are lacking, if we hand what we DO have over to Jesus it will be enough.

We may not always know the ultimate solution to our problems, but we can always at least take the next step. We may even come to a time and place where it feels we’ve reached the end and think we can’t go on. But then we remember the one who brought us to where we are, and we trust that he must have done that for a reason, and we find a way to go on.

That, is the miracle.

And that miracle is at the heart of Communion.

Communion is THE central sacrament of the church – the central earthly sign that points towards God’s kingdom.

It begins with a prayer of thanksgiving, one that reminds of all that God has done for us, in the gifts of creation, in the actions of people of faith, in the words of prophets and poets and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But then communion becomes a physical act. Henri Nouwen in his book “The Life of the Beloved” says that the acts of communion are a reminder of who we are as God’s people: the bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given. We as God’s people are taken, blessed, broken of the things that attach us to the kingdoms of this world, and sent as signs of the Kingdom of God for others.

That’s why in the past I’ve been pretty intentional about the way I’ve served communion in the past. I haven’t used pre-cubed bread or wafers much, I love the reminder that we are one body. I don’t have people take their own piece of bread, I have placed it in their hand as a sign that grace isn’t something we grab for, but something we receive.

It’s why don’t often have people kneel when they receive communion. Sometimes it’s a helpful thing, a reminder of our place before God, but I’m also aware that it can lead us to think that worthiness for communion is about our penitence, or our guilt or our humility – it’s not.

Not about our understanding either. That’s why I don’t limit communion to adults, or to youth who have completed confirmation, or place any other restrictions on who can come to the table. Here’s the truth: none of us will ever know the extent of God’s love and sacrifice for us. How can we pretend to set limits on who knows enough.

The Church of the Middle Ages had many debates about communion, scholarly attempts to describe the mystery at the

heart of the sacrament. One of the deepest debates involved the idea of transubstantiation: how the bread can really BECOME the body of Christ. There were and still are all kinds of deep philosophical philosophical debates about this issue, discussion of “essence” and “substance”, and whether Christ’s presence is physical or spiritual or both.

I can’t claim to have a lot of insight on most of that. First, I’m not a philosopher, so the precise shades of meaning of many of those terms eludes me. But I have always been interested in one of question. To the degree that the bread becomes the body of Christ, when does it happen?

Some say it’s the moment when the presider gives the epiclesis, the part of the communion prayer that invites the presence of the Holy Spirit to pour out onto the bread and transform it.

But I have my own, admittedly unorthodox, theory.

It’s based on something I learned in a biology class many years ago. Fun fact – the inside of a loaf of hard, crusty bread is one of the most sterile environments there is. That’s what made bread such a staple of the ancient world – if you baked it well, and kept it dry and crust intact, it would keep for a long, long time.

But as soon as you break the crust, or soak it – do anything that allows the outside world to get at the soft interior of the loaf, all the microbes in the environment have access and it spoils easily.

I think that is when the bread truly becomes the body of Christ. When it is broken, open to the world. Vulnerable, but also ready to be shared.

It is in sharing the bread that we, broken as we sometimes are, become the body of Christ.

We can't do it the way we usually would right now, and that is a source of sorrow for me. But as I've been offering communion online for the last several months, I've come to realize, it has also been a valuable reminder.

We may not be able to share bread at the table the way we would like. We may not be able to gather as the body of Christ the way we would like.

But we can offer what we have, the way that we can. And by we can rest assured that through the power of Jesus Christ it will be enough.

Thanks be to God. AMEN