

Matthew 14:13-21

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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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GOSPEL READING

Matthew 14:13-21

13 Now when Jesus heard [that John the Baptist had been killed], 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. 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 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

A recent article in the New York Times declared: “Tailors Know New Yorkers’ Pandemic Secret: Everyone Got Fat!” adding: “Tailors across New York City are expanding waistlines and moving buttons to accommodate the “’Quarantine 15.’”¹ Some of us can relate. I know I’ve had to resolve to cut back on my pandemic baking.

¹ Sarah Maslin Nir, “Tailors Know New Yorkers’ Pandemic Secret: Everyone Got Fat!” (New York Times, July 25, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/25/nyregion/coronavirus-tailors-cleaners-weight-gain.html>

At the same time, though, when the tailors say “Everyone got fat,” we know they don’t actually mean “everyone.” They mean, “everyone who can afford to take their clothes to a tailor for alterations.” In fact, just three days later, the same newspaper had an article about how, during this pandemic, hunger has increased even as poverty hasn’t. The federal aid that just expired worked even better than anticipated in creating a cushion for those who might fall into poverty, but, at the same time, checks get delayed, grocery prices are soaring, and many people are having difficulty accessing food. As the article stated, “Poverty is measured annually; people eat daily.” And, “...When you need to eat, you need to eat now.”²

Jesus and his first disciples would have known something about that. As a group of itinerant preachers who were dependent on the generosity of others, never knowing when or if they would have a meal, they knew the literal feel of food insecurity. No wonder they tried to keep a little bit tucked away for when they got desperate.

So, there they were on that remote hillside, far from town, after a full day of Jesus moving through the crowd to heal person after person. Evening was approaching, and their bellies were starting to rumble. So, the disciples told Jesus that he should

² Jason DeParle, “Why Hunger Can Grow Even When Poverty Doesn’t” (New York Times, July 28, 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/us/politics/coronavirus-hunger-poverty.html>

send the crowd away so that they could find food, and Jesus said to them, “*You* give them something to eat.” When they heard that, they took mental inventory of the contents of their backpacks: five loaves and two fish. These loaves would have been small and flat, like pita or naan. Even divided just among the thirteen of them, five loaves and two fish would have made a very modest meal. But spread out across that hillside in every direction were five thousand families—men, women, and children. Five loaves and two fish wouldn’t be enough for each person in that multitude to get even a crumb or a fish bone. The disciples tell Jesus that, but he just says, “Bring them here to me.”

And remarkably, they do. They hand him everything they have, while their stomachs rumble sadly. Then, “taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus 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.”

Out of so little came so much—and everyone ate for free.

“Listen,” we read in Isaiah, “everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!”

As Professor Steven B. Reid of Baylor University points out, in Isaiah's time, the shift from a barter economy to a money economy is only just beginning. Other than the elite, "those who have no money" would have meant just about everyone.³ Yet, Isaiah quotes Divine Wisdom, who is shouting at the top of her voice like a vendor rolling down the street with a food cart: "Free water! Free milk! Free food! Come and get it!"

We might think, "Free food! What's wrong with it?" Or we might think, "Free food? Save it for the needy: I can pay." But between those who can afford to bake away their anxieties and those who open their cupboards to find them bare, free food is the great equalizer. And it acknowledges something else: every human being is hungry, in one way or another.

The disciples were hungry. I suspect their desire to send the crowds off to find dinner was less about compassion for the crowds than it was so that they could sit and eat their own little bit of food without hungry eyes watching.

³ Steven B. Reid, "Commentary on Isaiah 55:1-5" (*Working Preacher*, August 2, 2020) https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4537

The crowd must have been hungry. But, at that point, we hadn't heard a peep from them about food. What they had been hungry for, enough to swarm out of their villages, was the healing and companionship of Jesus.

Jesus was hungry, too, for some solitude. He had just learned about the death of John the Baptist. He went out into the countryside to find some time alone—but the crowds followed him like a bunch of demanding toddlers, and his compassion for them made him relent and give them what they needed.

And we're hungry, too. When we keep rifling through the fridge even while we're packing on the pounds, it's not because we're hungry for food. We're hungry for normalcy, for some reassurance about the future, for meaning in the midst of this madness, for connection in this time of isolation.

We are all hungry.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”⁴

⁴ Quoted in *Good Quotes*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/40054-there-are-people-in-the-world-so-hungry-that-god>

That day on the hillsides, that is exactly how God appeared to everyone present: as bread. Because when the disciples handed over their food to Jesus—their food, which was barely enough for them—Jesus took it and blessed it and broke it, and offered it back. Jesus turned what had been *their* food into everyone’s food, and suddenly, there was more than enough to go around.

How did that happen? One theory is that, when the disciples handed over their bread and fish—when they let go and decided to share—others were inspired to do the same. Others who may have been more privileged, or who may have shared the same food insecurities and had learned always to keep at least a few crumbs on hand. But reluctantly or not, with the encouragement of Jesus, and his reassuring presence, even the most anxious hoarder was willing to let go.

In my opinion, that is an even bigger miracle than some kind of magical multiplication; because when we are anxious and fixated on scarcity, to let go of the little we have feels impossibly hopeless and foolish.

Yet, when everyone shared, the crumbs of the individual offerings became a feast of unbelievable plenty. Imagine the communal joy, as they ate their fill and still ended up with twelve baskets overflowing—twelve, the biblical symbol for faith

and fulfillment. Because different hungers were fulfilled in that moment—the hunger of their bellies, as they were able to eat freely of all they wanted; and the hunger of their hearts, as the shared meal transformed them into a true community, picnicking in the presence of Jesus.

So now, as we get ready to approach Jesus' table, for what are we hungry? And what do we have that we can add to the meal?

“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish,” say the disciples, for whom “here” is a place of scarcity.

“Bring them here to me,” says Jesus, for whom “here” is a place of compassion and abundance.

We are living in a world of fear and hunger, and none of us has enough to fill the void. But we all have something to offer. It might be money for the food bank. It might be a place to stay for someone who needs shelter. It might be a listening ear for someone who is lonely. Jesus just asks that we give what we have. Not so that we can starve—quite the opposite.

Jesus asks us to share what we have so that we can transform this time of fear and scarcity, into a time of faithful abundance. Because it's only separately that we are in want. Together, we always have enough.

So, what's tucked away in your backpack? What's in mine? What's in the backpack of our church, if we really took an inventory?

When we let go of our crumbs, our newly-opened hands can finally receive the nourishment for which we are truly hungry: bread, for our bellies; friendship for our souls; and all of it in the form of Jesus.

Because when we are really hungry, God can only appear to us in the form of bread. And here it is, blessed, abundant, and free.