

Wilderness feasting
Matthew 14.13-21; 1 Samuel 21.1-6

Of all of Jesus' miracles, the Feeding of the 5,000 is the only one that includes so many people. Most of his transforming encounters are with individuals, one body at a time. But here, here in the wilderness, thousands receive a miraculous feeding. From this story, a story that is told in all four gospels, we get a full-spectrum view of the enoughness and beauty of the Kingdom of God. The masses are hungry; and they are fed.

The mass of humanity that is gathered is likely made up mostly of people on the margins—those who feel the domination and denial of both the empire and the Temple. Because they are hungry, because their lives are being squeezed and their bodies are sick and starved, they've come to this deserted place. They've followed Jesus to this wilderness place to see and hear what he has to offer them. And here, without money or price, they are fed out of the abundance of God's storehouses. Their hunger is satisfied. And there is more than enough bread leftover for everyone to take some home with them.

This story of the multiplication of bread and fish is told after the parables. In between the parables and this miraculous feeding, we learn that John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin and mentor, has been killed, his head served on a platter at Herod's birthday party. The news of John's death disturbed Jesus, disturbing because of the wantonness and cruelty of empire, but also because of what it signaled for his own life. So Jesus went on retreat, removing himself to the wilderness. The wilderness that was the place of John's ministry. The wilderness where Jesus had been tested and his identity as God's beloved son had been deeply formed. So he went to the wilderness to be re-membered by God.

But his solitude was broken by the crowds. Matthew says, "He had compassion for them and cured their sick." And when it was time for dinner, Jesus insisted that the crowd should

stay, should sit and eat. So they stayed, and he fed them with what they had, which was five loaves of bread and two fish.

What an amazing story. It's an amazing story at face value. But it's even more amazing as we keep listening to it. When we keep listening we begin to hear and see the layers of stories being told.

As we know, Matthew isn't just telling of the Jesus story—his story about Jesus is also a re-telling and re-imagining of the story of his own people. Jesus is the Son of God, the Word of God made flesh. And Jesus has revealed God. And this revealing of God, this un-hiding of God is exposing misunderstandings and wrong assumptions about God. So as we would expect of Matthew, in this story he's telling the Jesus story...and re-telling the story of God's people through the Good News of Jesus.

This story of the multiplication of bread and fish would have been recognized as more than a miracle by Matthew's audience. For one thing, they would have recognized that a story about bread is never just about bread. In the Hebrew Bible, and his audience knew their Bible, bread is metaphor for *torah*. And they would also have understood that the detail that five loaves of bread were available wasn't about the accuracy the event...*Are they sure it was 5? And not 4? Or 6? ...* that there were five loaves reveals an additional layer of storytelling and a greater truth in the story. *Torah*, as we know, has five books. The five loaves of bread being multiplied are also pointing to the Five Books of Moses.

What begins to come into view in this story is Jesus as a Moses figure. We begin to hear refrains of the masses of people wandering in the wilderness. We begin to see manna in the wilderness. It was while the Hebrew people were in the wilderness that Moses went to the top of the mountain, and God met Moses there and gave him *torah*. Moses brought this Word of God down from the mountain and gave it to the people.

But in this wilderness it's Jesus. And the bread that Jesus is giving to these people didn't fall from heaven—it came from among them! Nor did Jesus go to the top of the mountain to meet God and to be given God's word. Instead, he gave back to them what they already had within them!

How amazing! This layer of the story is, I think, harder to believe

There's another association that Matthew's listeners would have heard as they listened to his story. There's one other place in Scripture where five loaves of bread show up: in 1 Samuel. It's the story of David receiving the Bread of Presence for himself and his 100 men to eat. Matthew referred to this story two chapters ago, after Jesus and his disciples had been reprimanded for gathering grain on the Sabbath. Jesus answered the Pharisees, saying, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests."

This incident is found in 1 Samuel 21. It happens right after David and his good friend Jonathan have wept and kissed each other good-bye. They had just learned that the king, Jonathan's father, wanted to kill David. So David was leaving town to escape death.

David arrived in a place called Nob and met a priest. They chatted a bit and then David asked, "Now then, what have you at hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here." And the priest answered that he didn't have any ordinary bread, just holy bread. Which David could have *if* his men were ritually clean. David assured the priest, "Indeed women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men are holy even when it is a common journey; how much more today will their vessels be holy?"

The story concludes: “So the priest gave him the holy bread; for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence....” One loaf of bread for 100 men.

With this story of David asking for five loaves of bread and receiving the Bread of the Presence, we hear yet another layer, an even fuller, richer story. It offers us a new lens for seeing what is happening in this feeding of 5,000. David came to the Temple and asked for ordinary bread and was given holy bread. But before the priest gave him the only bread that was available, the sacred bread, the priest needed assurance that holy bread would be eaten by holy men, ritually clean men. The bread he had was God’s bread. It could not be given to or eaten by ordinary men, by un-holy people.

In contrast, when Jesus asks for whatever food is on hand, he’s given ordinary bread and fish. And here is where I think the real miracle is: in Jesus’ hands, ordinary bread becomes holy bread. Jesus *took* the bread, he looked to heaven and *blessed* it, he *broke* it, and he *gave* it back to them and they *ate*. And they knew, they knew with their minds and in their bodies and bones, they knew that God was present, that God was with them in this eating. Ordinary people became a holy people. Amazing!

Here, in this wilderness space, they experienced the power and presence of One God...a living God unmediated by the Temple, a loving and liberating God beyond the tyranny of empire. No one asked if they were ritually clean. It didn’t matter that they were ordinary people. No one asked if they were worthy. No one tested their theology or questioned their lifestyles. No one cared about social status or ethnicity or biology. They “all ate and were filled.” In this meal, at this feast, heaven was on earth.

And there were 12 basketsful leftover. A sign of abundance to be sure. But again, for Matthew’s listeners, they understood the number 12 to signal the 12 sons of Jacob, those who understood themselves as chosen by God, God’s people. And here the crowd was fed

with enough left over for each of Jacob's sons. *Everyone* was included. Every *body* was given bread. At this Table, at this meal, they knew and experienced themselves as *one* body, *one* people, children of God. At Jesus' Table they were given food to eat, food to satisfy their hunger. And they were given the miracle of transformation and possibility and liberation.

At his last meal with his disciples, when Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them to eat, surely he was recalling for them the feeding of the 5,000, the eating of the 5,000. At that wilderness feast, Jesus took ordinary food, whatever food was on hand. In that time and place, what could have been more ordinary than bread and fish? At the meal with his disciples, Jesus took the ordinary food on their table, and offered the same ritual of *taking, blessing, breaking, giving, and eating*. He gave them this ritual to remember that God is present. That God is with them and within them. That they are holy. That they are God's beloved daughters and sons. Jesus gives us this ritual so that we too will recall the miraculous eating in the wilderness, when 5,000 men (besides women and children) feasted on the Bread of Presence.