

You Feed Them

Questions of the Congregation Series
I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about: Hunger

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Matthew 14:13-21

¹³Now 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. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then 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. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Undoubtedly, you have heard this story. It's the only miracle in all four gospels. And there are more than a few miracle stories told about Jesus feeding large groups of people from seemingly nothing. Often, when we read a passage like this, we take it out of context, and when we do that, we sometimes miss critical points of the story.

This story of feeding the 5000 transforms when we look at the passage before it— when you place it in context.

Earlier in Matthew 14, we read about King Herod. Whose name you should recognize – he's one of the rulers Jesus goes before, prior to his crucifixion. In the passage before our reading today, we learn some about his family and a feast they had. A feast they had that sounds like it belongs more in an episode of Game of Thrones than the Bible.

As a young Jewish man, Herod married a woman, but on a visit to his half-brother's palace in Rome, he falls in love with his sister-in-law, Herodias. This action, of course, starts a war, which Herod loses. Still, somehow he ends up with Herodias, who brings her daughter to live with her and Herod in Jerusalem.

For some fascinating reason, Herod asks John the Baptist, this popular religious figure bouncing around Jerusalem (and keep in mind, is also Jesus' cousin) – Herod asks John the Baptist if it is lawful for him to marry his sister-in-law. John, unsurprisingly, says no, resulting in Herodias hatred for John. Her status is insecure until Herod marries her and John has just put her in jeopardy. Herod likely isn't his biggest fan either. But, John the Baptist is popular, so Herod can't kill him without risking his people's anger. So instead, Herod has John flogged and sent to prison.

So, to get back to this feast. When we find Herod at this feast, he is reclining at the table with his friends and is enthralled watching his young stepdaughter dance for him and his guests.

Herod is so pleased by his stepdaughter's dance; he swears to give her anything she asks, up to half of his kingdom. When Herodias hears this, she convinces her daughter to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. The young girl asks for what her mother has told her to ask. She asks King Herod for the head of John the Baptist. If Herod refuses, he risks embarrassment now in front of his guests, which I assume, he thinks is worse than his people's potential reaction to John's death. So, Herod orders his guards to kill him, to behead John the Baptist. The guards do it. They bring the head to Herod, who brings it to his stepdaughter, who takes it to her mother, who is pleased there is one less threat to her security.

What a contrast then, when we arrive at the next banquet—this one hosted by Jesus and his followers: the one where miracles happen.

Jesus hears of the murder of John, of his cousin. In grief, he tries to go off somewhere to be alone. But the crowds understand that Jesus is going somewhere, and in hopes that he will heal them, they follow him. And Jesus, having compassion for the masses, then heals the sick among them and stays with them.

The day goes by, and it is evening, and the disciples come to Jesus saying, "This is a deserted place, and it's late; send the crowds away so that they can go grab food somewhere." And Jesus responds: "they don't need to go anywhere. You feed them."

I imagine the disciples were not very pleased with that response. They brought perhaps only enough food for themselves—not enough for the 5,000 men, not including women and children, which likely brought up the number to more like 10,000. But no, Jesus tells *his disciples*, *you* feed them.

The disciples say defensively, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And Jesus says, "fine, bring 'em here." And he tells the crowds to sit, to recline, the same word used in the previous passage, with Herod reclining with his guests.

Black Womanist Theologian Mitzi J. Smith writes about this passage, pointing out that Jesus forces the disciples "to articulate their own sense of lack in relation to the needs of the crowd. The disciples respond negatively to Jesus' command to provide food for the crowd, and their response is based on the reality of their own limited provisions: they have nothing except five loaves and two fish. In other words, what they do have they believe to be insufficient to deal with the situation."

But then, Jesus takes the bread and fish; he looks up to heaven. He blesses and breaks the loaves.

Jesus gives the food to the disciples so that the disciples can give it to the crowds. The disciples give Jesus what they see as "not enough," and Jesus transforms it into more-than-enough.

Growing up, I always heard this as a regular miracle story—a story about Jesus doing something that is basically impossible for us to replicate. But then, I listened to a sermon about this that changed the way I see it.

The crowd is made up of 5000 men, not including women and children. Meaning, women, and children were there. Mothers and children. I do not know any mother that does not take some kind of snack out with her when she takes her kids somewhere: Cheerios, grapes, crackers, something. My sister always seems to have the entire grocery store in her purse. Mothers bring food.

I find it hard to believe that no one else in this multitude of more than 10,000 had food. And how does it impact the way we hear the story? If, instead of it being some mystic multiplication of bread and fish, it was instead a community inspired by one another to share.

The passage continues, "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."

According to the [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#), only three countries have higher poverty rates than the US-South Africa, Costa Rica, and Romania.¹ According to Feeding America, even in the world's greatest food-producing nation, children and adults face poverty and hunger in every county across the US.

- In 2018, more than 38 million people lived in poverty in America. For a family of four, that means earning just \$25,000 per year.

¹ This organization is comprised of 37 countries, all developed. They determine the poverty rate as the ratio of the number of people (in a given age group) whose income falls below the poverty line; taken as half the median household income of the total population (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>)

- Children are more likely to face food insecurity than any other group in the United States, which makes this mess to decide whether schools are open or not, even more complicated.
- The [coronavirus pandemic](#) has left millions of families without stable employment. [More than 54.3 million people, including 18 million children, may experience food insecurity](#) in 2020.²

That's a pretty big crowd to feed. And like the disciples, I know I don't have enough to feed them all. But Jesus still says to the Disciples, and I think to me, "you feed them." Jesus says to you, "you feed them."

When I hear that, I feel inadequate, terrified, and like I can't do anything but fail in trying to feed everyone. And that's true. I can't feed everyone. But I wonder if *we* could? As individuals, it's easy to think of ourselves as pretty powerless. But as a community of faith, there is hope and strength. There might even be enough foolishness to find that nothing is impossible with God – nothing is impossible when God empowers us to love. With God, our "not-enough" becomes more than enough.

My friend, Reverend Erika Spaet said of this chapter, at Herod's banquet, the wealthy few indulge themselves, drunk on drink and power. At that banquet, a young girl is put on display and forced to mediate a murder. At that banquet, pride and revenge rule over choices and actions.

² Food insecurity is defined as, "a household's inability to provide enough food for every person to live an active, healthy life. In the United States currently, 1 in 9 people struggle with hunger." (<https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>)

But at this banquet, where Jesus is the host and disciples are the servers, the multitude is invited to stay, to linger, to break bread together; At this banquet, the sick are healed; At this banquet, the community nourishes thousands.

Whatever you think about miracles, whether the bread and the fish were magically multiplied, or perhaps everyone simply did what you do when you are invited to dinner – you bring what you have, and you put it on the shared table, and in the end, there's more than enough to go around.

Whatever you think about miracles, I think the real miracle is that there is another table where there is always space for everyone.

Rather than sitting at a dinner with the rich and powerful watching a state-sanctioned murder, we are invited to this other table.

This other table where a table where we get to participate in providing for one another, this other table where our host is Jesus, where we partake in bread and cup proclaiming that with God, nothing is impossible.

In this strange, heartbreaking, complicated time, I wonder what that might look like for us. What might it be like for us to take on the hunger of the world?

Friends, Jesus tells us who gets to feed the hungry. To the disciples, and us, he says, "you feed them." And while Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church certainly can't solve world hunger, we can join with food justice organizations, to feed those we can.

The BMPC Hunger Fund has been a priority for our congregation since the early 1970s. Our congregants have responded generously during the pandemic – and while giving has significantly increased so has the need. Through your generous financial contributions, the Hunger Committee has significantly augmented the financial support we offer to 18 different food pantries and feeding programs. They've also been able to provide funding to mission partners who are now pulled into the food insecurity crisis because of the pandemic.

As followers of Jesus, Christ calls us to overcome our sense of powerlessness and anxiety over our insufficiency. We are called to recognize our God-given capacity as a community to bring what we do have to the table. And while I doubt Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church can resolve world hunger, we can participate in what God is already doing.

Amen.