

## **MIRACLES: GOD'S MEANS TO AN END**

**Matthew 14:13-21**

**Preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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Even if you didn't grow up in the Church and don't know your Bible, chances are still pretty good you're at least familiar with the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. It's one of those iconic stories that capture our imaginations primarily because it's both fantastic and comforting at the same time.

But after the fascination wears thin, inquiring minds want to set out to deconstruct this story because, after all, you just can't feed five thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish.

So, how do we post moderns make any sense of it? Briefly there are at least two interpretations, one mystical and the other rational. The mystical interpretation: Jesus literally multiplied the loaves and fish, more than enough to feed the crowd. I have no problem accepting this interpretation, if only because I believe God certainly has the power to suspend the laws of nature whenever he wants to get our attention.

But I'm equally open to the rational explanation: Jesus' willingness to share what little he had started a chain reaction of generosity within the crowd. Those who bought food for themselves, willingly gave what little they had with those who had nothing. In this interpretation, the real miracle isn't the suspension of God's laws of nature but the transformation of human hearts. Moved by Jesus' generosity they caught the spirit of sacrifice, gladly sharing what little they had with others.

For me, this second interpretation is the more compelling. Since God is God, no one could argue God couldn't easily suspend the laws of nature, but God's ability to change people's attitudes and actions is limited by his gift of free will. We can choose whether or not to cooperate with God's plans, in this case to be compassionate and generous with strangers. So the real miracle of this story is really about the people in the crowd who allowed themselves to become Christ-like as God created new hearts and a right spirit within them.

Personally, I find both interpretations are helpful, because both testify to the power of Sovereign Love and the emerging presence of God's Kingdom in our broken world.

But being truth seekers, we can't stop here. We're obligated to move beyond the wow factor of this miracle until we can rationally and spiritually discern its hidden implications.

Let's begin by acknowledging the pain this scripture brings to those who wonder why they're left out of the story. It's one thing to embrace this miracle on a full stomach, it's another if your belly is empty and you worry whether or not your starving children will be fed in the next twenty-four hours.

This is when the loaves and fishes story becomes problematic. Instead of celebrating God's provision, some are left excoriating God's absence, asking, "Where is Jesus when I need him? Doesn't he care when my children are starving? If God is all powerful, knowing and loving, why doesn't he give us our daily bread?"

The feeding of the five thousand gives a glimpse into what life should be like now and will be like when God's Kingdom finally comes and God's will is always done on earth as it is in heaven. Instead of everybody looking out for themselves, everybody will become Good Samaritans looking out for each other. Greatness and power won't be measured by being above others, but by lowering yourself beneath others; not by how much you own but by how much you give away.

Unfortunately, this vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth is a distant dream. We live in the here and now where sharing and caring rarely comes naturally, but usually reluctantly, because we're afraid if we give away too much there won't be anything left over for ourselves.

More than being an isolated one time event that happened two thousand years ago, the story of Jesus' feeding the five thousand should be a template of what could be happening today. Those five thousand plus people were a microcosm of the world we live in, a world of haves and have-nots, where the haves carefully hide their provisions, fearing discovery would put us in the uncomfortable position of having to share with strangers.

But Christ being in the center of that crowd, where he could be seen by all passing out his meager supply of bread and fish to those around him, inspired a spirit that went beyond generosity to sacrifice. It became a feast, a joyful celebration of God's love birthing something new and wonderful. At that precise moment, suddenly everyone experienced the meaning behind Jesus' teaching, "...those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Luke 16:24)

By giving away their provisions, they discovered, maybe for the first time, what life is really all about, and Christ himself made it happen.

When the Bible says we're created in God's image, doesn't it mean we're created with the capacity for self-sacrifice? Jesus declared, "When you see me you see the Father." (John 14:9) Jesus, the personification of God, was all about emptying himself to fill others up. He gladly let himself be drained of his power if only because he was motivated by love. It's true isn't it? When you love someone, you aren't afraid to give yourself away, in fact it's an imperative. Doesn't that describe Jesus and shouldn't that describe us?

If I was a politically motivated preacher, I could make the case today's scripture advocates socialism and the enforced redistribution of wealth. On the other hand if I were an unscrupulous preacher, I could manipulate this scripture into a stewardship sermon, suggesting you give sacrificially to the ministry of Babcock Church.

Hopefully being perceived by you as being neither political or unscrupulous, the better option is for me to encourage you to reclaim your primary identities as God's children and Christ's disciples so that the next time God confronts you with your neighbor's lack of provision, you'll be in sync with God's will and be ready to sacrifice what God has given you.

Of course, if you want to be charitable you also have to be wise and make sure your giving isn't wasted or abused. For example, people who work with the homeless and drug addicted counsel against giving money to people who beg at intersections. Instead they advise we give to reliable organizations and ministries like the Salvation Army. But that doesn't help the man with the sign saying he's hungry. So, here's a suggestion: if God placed a burden on your heart to do something for that homeless person, drive to the nearest McDonalds, buy a meal and a cold drink, bring it back to him and say, "God bless you." Maybe you're not giving him what he wants but you're giving him what he needs. Then, you can also pray for him throughout the day as God reminds you. What's more, by praying for this homeless person, God may speak to you and open your eyes to new and systematic opportunities to feed the least of Christ's brothers and sisters on an ongoing basis.

Certainly it's overwhelming to think about people around us and all over the world who haven't food and shelter. It's enough to Cause you to throw up your hands in despair and frustration. But that doesn't mean we can't do something to make a difference. Our motivation? Again, remember that image of Jesus sharing his food with those who had none, but more to the point, remember God's sovereign love changing hearts and minds, empowering us to do something important: giving people in need an experience of God's Kingdom coming near to them.

In a few minutes we will celebrate the Lord's Supper and remember Jesus. May our prayer be that Christ will multiply the loaves and fishes through us for our neighbor in need and for his sake. Amen.