

In the Breaking of the Bread

Psalm 145: 8-9, 14-21

Matthew 14: 13-21

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Psalm 145: 8-9, 14-21

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.

The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

Matthew 14: 13-21

Now 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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." 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. 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.

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"You give them something to eat."

These are certainly not the words the disciples expected to hear from Jesus. In his compassion for the crowd he had put aside his raw, tender, grief at the brutal death of his cousin, his friend, John the Baptist, and instead ministered to the crowd who had followed. He cured their sicknesses, he healed their wounds. His actions echoed the psalmist, "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made." Perhaps it fulfilled a need in Jesus to experience good in a world that had just torn so much from him.

Now in the disciples' compassion for the hungry people, they ask Jesus to encourage them to go into the distant villages to find food. After all, it's late, it's been a long and emotional day. They all need something to eat, and they ask Jesus to feed them.

"You give them something to eat."

The disciples were surely stunned and confused. Between them they merely had five loaves of bread and two fish. That was enough for them, but that was all. Enough for Jesus and the twelve. Certainly not for the hungry thousands. What Jesus asked them to do was daunting and impossible.

They must have wondered how they could act on Jesus' words. In a matter of seconds, so many thoughts and questions must have gone through their minds.

Why are we, just a few, being asked to feed so many?

How can we possibly feed so many people?

How could we ever afford enough food for all of them? It would take more than two hundred denari, more than two hundred days of wages, and even that wouldn't be enough bread to feed all these people.ⁱ

There could never be enough food to feed them for even a single night.

Why is this for us to do? They must certainly be capable of taking care of themselves.

Did their compassion for the crowd turn to annoyance?

Why do we have to feed them when they are capable of going to the village on their own?

Why do we have to feed them when they irresponsibly came out here to such a deserted place and did not think to bring food?

"You give them something to eat."

Jesus' words echoed in their heads as they faced what seemed to be an impossible task of compassion, hospitality and nurture for the crowd. They had been spiritually fed all day by the Bread of Life, and now, somehow, they were to be fed the bread that nourished them physically.

Lost in their questions and confusion, the disciples could only reply, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And Jesus responded, "Bring them here to me."

Just as he will do not too long from now at the Last Supper, on the night he asks to be remembered but is denied and betrayed, Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, blesses it, and shares it with all the people through the hands of the disciples.

The blessing and the breaking of the bread for all present was a miracle, the turning of scarcity into abundance. The followers of Jesus feeding the people was discipleship. Jesus did not tell them to buy the ingredients to make more bread. He did not send his disciples off with their nets to try their luck in the sea. He invited them to trust him with what they have, and to believe that he and what they had are enough. The disciples will continue the work of feeding God's people, both with physical food and verbal food, with food that nurtures the body and that which nurtures the soul.

In the breaking of the bread, scarcity becomes abundance, the hungry are fed, and Jesus, the Bread of Life, is remembered by his disciples then and now.

The first twelve disciples came to Jesus asking for his help to feed the hungry. As far as their eyes could see they saw people who needed something to eat. It was an overwhelming sight to see the need yet have so little to offer to them.

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."

"You give them something to eat."

Followers, disciples, of Jesus today are no different. In our land of plenty we know that there are hungry people everywhere. According to the USDA, more than 34 million people, including 9 million children, in the United States are food insecure.

The pandemic has increased food insecurity among families with children and communities of color, who already faced hunger at much higher rates before the pandemic.

Every community in the country is home to families who face hunger. But rural communities are especially hard hit by hunger.

Many households that experience food insecurity do not qualify for federal nutrition programs and visit their local food banks and other food programs for extra support.ⁱⁱ

We pray for the day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. We pray one of Anne Lamott's essential prayers, 'help, help, help.' We pray Jesus' own words, 'give us this day our daily bread.'

And Jesus responds, "You give them something to eat."

As Mother Teresa so wisely taught, "Prayer without action is no prayer at all. You have to do your work as if everything depends on you. Then leave the rest to God."

In the breaking of the bread in that ancient, deserted place, in the breaking of the bread when we gather at the Communion table, Jesus invites us to eat, and Jesus also invites us to serve.

The first disciples didn't get it, at least initially. And often we don't get it. We look around and we're certain there isn't enough. Enough people...enough energy...enough creativity...enough resources...enough whatever—to meet some need, to do some task.

Boston College theology professor Amey Victoria Adkins-Jonesⁱⁱⁱ asks us to see that, "It's a mindset that empowers us to rebuke the imposed limits of deficit, need, scarcity, and lack—and asks us to look more closely at what we have and hold together....What is it to consider the miracle of this moment as also taking seriously a mindset of the resources, gifts, talents, and people already in community, with an approach that is based in place and starts with relationships and relationality, that works inclusively to make sure that everyone is involved and no one is left to the periphery?"

It sounds not only like the story but like a vision of the miraculous that can manifest among us now. To think—we can be hosts of God's presence, because God is already here, with us.

And what then of this perspective for the church? What would it look like to start not necessarily with the "Jesus-shaped hole in your heart" but instead with the theology of shared meals and sunsets and summer lawns together? To learn to look to the lessons of being present to where we are, with the baseline assumption that there is already enough? To be a body of Christ that magnifies and multiplies the resources of what we've already been blessed with from his hand to begin with?

What if we are already the miracle in God's hands, and what if we took seriously the instructions to give one another something to eat?

"You give them something to eat." Amen.

ⁱ John 6:7

ⁱⁱ <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.christiancentury.org/amey-victoria-adkins-jones>