



08/02/2020 Trusting Our Vulnerability
Isaiah 55:1-5; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

The miracle of Jesus feeding more than five thousand men, women, and children is a widely studied miracle.

This passage follows the story of the beheading of John the Baptist in prison by the hand of Herod. After hearing of the gruesome execution, Jesus is deeply grieved and needs some time alone. He needs to step away from it all by himself, tending to his own grief and probably his own fear at what this must mean for him. How can it be that a truth teller's life could be abruptly cut short by the guilt, the fear, the callous hearts of the privileged powerful?

But just as at other times, Jesus is tracked down by the villagers and followed along the lake.

After seeing the crowd, Jesus feels compassion for them and once on shore, he starts healing the sick and then eventually he feeds them. How is it even possible, I wonder, that with his own heart, broken wide open, Jesus still is able to see and respond to the needs of thousands?

In our impatience to engage with the fantastic news of the multiplication of the five loaves and two fish, or to explore the challenge that Jesus presents to the disciples when he says that they have what the crowd needs, we overlook the inner turmoil that Jesus might have gone through.

He is grieving his cousins' murder and, at the same time, he considers the need of others. We need to slow down and take this in: Jesus looks at the crowd and is moved with compassion. He cares and his heart is wide enough to hold both his grief and the crowd's need for healing. His personal relationship with the Father and his devotional piety has trained his heart to stretch his love capacity in preparation to times such as this.

His disciples care, too, and there is a sense of urgency with the darkening of the day. Jesus has been curing the sick people in the crowd for a long time. It is time for him to stop. It is time for the people to go. They are genuinely concerned for him and show care for the crowd. It is a legitimate concern to ask Jesus to dismiss them so they can go and find something to eat. They simply are aware of their location (a deserted place)



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and the time (it is getting late and the children are probably starting to get restless and hungry).

Jesus says to the disciples, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat. They reply, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish'" (Matthew 13:16).

Jesus seems perplexed and almost troubled by the disciples' request to send the people away. Have they learned anything about Jesus so far? Why would they send the crowd away when what they have is enough?

The disciples, on their side, are probably shocked at what Jesus is suggesting and look at him with wide-open eyes. How can five loaves and two fish be possibly enough? They cannot be accused of having a scarcity mentality; their limited resources are right there under anybody's scrutiny. Can anyone, Jesus included, deny the irrefutable evidence?

But I wonder: is it possible that they are anticipating the people's reaction when they present them with their meager resources? Or are they feeling totally helpless and in need of more training at the school of the Spirit?

Jesus is not denying the evidence of the small number of fish and loaves of bread. Anybody can see that. What Jesus is rather doing is challenging the disciples to acknowledge the sacredness of the moment: it is a moment of grace in which God is about to do something amazing with and through their help.

Their assessment of reality, of themselves and of their inadequate resources is about to be turned around. Jesus picks up on the disciples' anxiety about their seemingly limited assets and their need to care for the vulnerable masses.

But he also picks up on their own lack of trust in what they *do* have; he picks up on their lack of simplicity, their insecurity about having enough, and their lack of confidence in their ability of maintaining a non-anxious presence. He is interested not in their excuses but in building their love capacity and resolution.

Often, *being* for others is more important than *having* or even *doing* for others. Often, solidarity, presence, and companionship are more valuable than effectiveness.



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Ultimately, when we open our hearts to others in full disclosure and vulnerability, others are moved to do the same and share their resources...and the miracle gets multiplied. If the disciples trusted their own assessment of reality more than the command of Jesus, the people would have gone away hungry.

So, contrary to logic, Jesus does not command the people to leave but orders them to stay and sit down on the grass. He then gets to work by praying, blessing, and breaking the bread reminding us of the abundance of the previous parables of the yeast, the mustard seed, the treasure in the field, and the rare pearl and anticipating the symbolism of the Last Supper. The kingdom of heaven does not disappoint.

This feeding miracle demonstrates that the spiritual reality of the kingdom of God is not limited to the afterlife. Jesus attends to the concrete and current physical needs of the people. The fact that God has chosen to take on human flesh demonstrates that the physical world is important to God. Spirituality is not separated from physicality.

Jesus does not focus solely on the people's spiritual health. He is also concerned that they are sick. He empathizes with those who are hungry. God cares for the whole person and there is nothing that God has created that God despises. As it has been said by many others before, God does not create junk. We matter to God, and we should matter to ourselves taking good care of the body God has given us.

So, how do we feed the over 800 million people in the world who are hungry? And we know that along with poverty and hunger there is homelessness, geographic displacement, domestic distress and probably even violence, unemployment, health issues, educational concerns.

When we look at our resources, we may have a reaction similar to the one the disciples had, a reaction of fear and overwhelm. And yet, God has given us a world rich with resources that should be more than sufficient to sustain all of us. If we should ask the world leaders whether they agreed that, given the right conditions, their land could support their own people and produce enough goods to export, I think most of them would. But all nations face, at one time or another, prolonged challenges of political disagreements, economic distress, social unrest, inclement weather, and disease outbreaks.



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The combination of the global pandemic, the civil strife in the US, Honk Kong, Venezuela, the Middle-East, and Israel, the civil war in Syria, in Libya, and in Sudan, international rivalries, the destruction of crops by locusts in the Horn of Africa, and other weather-related disasters seems to be unprecedented.

In a warning to the world, the UN secretary general, António Guterres, has said: "Unless immediate action is taken, it is increasingly clear that there is an impending global food emergency that could have long-term impacts on hundreds of millions of children and adults."¹ Covid-19 has exacerbated the daily struggle of millions of people around the world.

Wouldn't it be something now, wouldn't the miracle of the multiplication of fish and loaves be just as great or even greater, if everyone within the sound of Jesus' voice were to do the same? I bet the disciples' eyes blinked in disbelief and their mouths opened in joyous laughter when their resources kept on multiplying and the crowd got fed.

We need to ask ourselves: Is it a matter of material assets or one of compassion, presence, and cooperation?

Sometimes, the issue is lack of awareness of the underlying causes of hunger, poverty, unemployment, and the precarious health that have brought people to the brink of despair. Sometimes, it is just the matter of taking the time to care and be present to the suffering of others.

Sometimes, it takes the willingness and courage to do what is right and the endurance to go against the grain in honest solidarity with those who suffer.

May the example of Jesus inspire us to embrace the wisdom of vulnerability. May we humbly trust the words of Jesus commanding us to share what we have. May our ministry be a joyous feast of abundant resources. Amen.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/09/world-faces-worst-food-crisis-50-years-un-coronavirus>
<https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-hunger-us>