

Introductory

The account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is found here and in the other synoptics (Mark 6: 30-44, Luke 9: 10-17) and in John (6: 1-13). Later, Matthew (15: 32-38) has an account of a similar feeding of four thousand people, a different incident. You feed people, what happens then? They get hungry. You feed them again, then what happens?

The John text is appointed to be read on Laetare (Lent 4), in the TLH one-year lectionary. In the LW three-year lectionary, this text is to be read on Pentecost 11A, and the John text is the reading appointed for Pentecost 10B. The parallel from Mark 6 is appointed to be read on Pentecost 9B in the LW lectionary, and as Proper 11B in the LSB.

When we last left Jesus, He was just finishing up a sermon series on parables. After that, He goes to Nazareth for His second rejection. Matthew then relates to us the details of the beheading of John the Baptizer. Now, upon hearing of that martyrdom, Jesus wants to get away. But as usual, His isolation is brief. The masses always seem to find Him.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is probably to Christians one of the most familiar of the miracles of Jesus. That familiarity can be a problem for the preacher. The listener who has heard this before and thinks he knows everything there is to know – or at least the basic and important things – about what happened here may be a tougher crowd.

You can do this thing. You can teach them new things they didn't already know. But the larger problem with that familiarity is the preacher who thinks he knows everything there is to know about this, at least the basic and important things. The preacher who does not learn new things is unlikely to be in a position to teach the hearer any new thing.

The last three Sundays were parables, and the next three Sundays will be about miracles, so this would be a good time to review the basics of miracles. Miracles are supernatural acts that violate the Laws of Nature, things that you would not expect a man to do, but that could and would be done by the one who invented those Laws; and Jesus is God.

The miracles of Jesus are done to confirm in the believer His identity as the Son of God. As I will often put it in sermons when talking about a miracle, "I can't do that. Can you?" The same miracles that confirm faith in a believer are seen by the unbeliever as proof that Jesus is from Satan or using some sort of slight of hand to do what He does.

The individual miracles also teach and show us things about what heaven will be like. This week we learn that there will be no lack of food in heaven, but an abundance. You may have to explain to Americans how that will be different from here, where we already have an abundance of food. Such a thing is rare historically and today in many places.

Miracles, while they attract a lot of attention, and rightly so, are not really all that common, and they done by only a few people, and in the NT done mostly by Jesus. This is to be expected, as noted, because of Jesus being who He is. My Confirmation Bible lists thirty-six “Miracles of Our Lord” and fifteen “Miracles of the Early Church.”

But we should remember that there are times in the Bible when people are said in a general way to do miracles. We should also keep in mind that John tells us that he was able to record only a fraction of the things that Jesus said and did. So we are not talking about a paucity of miracles, but of miracle-*doers*, and of specific miracles recorded.

A little bit of time spent on study of “σημείον – signs or miracles” would be beneficial. In the NT, Jesus does miracles, the Apostles do miracles, and those upon whose head the Apostles have “laid hands” (Acts 6:6) do miracles. And false teachers. Then that kind of miracle-doing stops, and in Acts 8 no miraculous work *can* be done sans the Apostles.

In 1 Corinthians 13:8, Paul says miracles will end, and then he goes on to tell us why. Having served their purpose, the written word – including accounts of miracles – is now available, and the miracles attested to in that Word “made more certain” (Peter) is sufficient. Those kinds miracles stop, but other kinds of miracles happen all the time.

The miraculous still *does* happen all the time right in front of our very faces. So says Augustine, as he talks about the changing of water into wine and marvels that we should marvel at that miracle, saying,

It is certainly no wonder for those who know that God did it. For He, the very one who every year does this on vines, made wine on that day at the wedding in those six water jars, which He ordered to be filled with water. For just as what the attendants put into the water jars was turned into wine by the Lord’s effort, so also what the clouds pour down is turned into wine by the effort of the same Lord. But that does not amaze us because it happens every year; by its regularity it has lost its wonderment. Yet it merits even greater reflection than that which was done in the water jars.
(Tractate 8-9)

Similarly, the “miracle” of birth is hardly noted because of its commonality. You could say that about a lot of things in God’s creation. You could say the same thing about things like what the bread and wine are in the Sacrament, and in Baptism, God takes the most common of all compounds, water, adds His powerful Word to it, and look at that!

He takes the most common of foods; bread and wine, adds His powerful Word to it, and Jesus is present in that place! If those aren't modern-day miracles, then I don't know what are. The response to those miracles these days will be similar to the response to miracles in that day; the believers will accept them for what they are and believe it.

Those miracles will help them better to know and understand the things of God, and the unbelievers will not. Their response will be to mock the Lutherans because you think "water, bread and wine will save them." That is actually the response of the Protestants. The response of the pagans goes beyond mocking, and they are becoming more vocal.

So why, when they come and visit, do they insist on getting a piece of that action – and by that I mean the Sacrament of the Altar – and they are furthermore greatly offended that they cannot participate in something they don't believe is there? Mostly, I think, he thinks that being barred from the Sacrament means we think of him as a lesser Christian.

And when the ELCA person tells you that she believes in the Real Presence, ask her why. Why do you believe in *that* miracle, when you don't believe in the ones that Jesus did, the ones recorded in the NT? Belief in miracles is an either/or; either you believe in the miracles that are recorded in the Bible and the ones that are commonplace, or you don't.

The Lutherans like to discuss whether or not this incident, especially as recorded in John, is sacramental or not. You have no doubt read about and have maybe engaged in those discussions. You can read it too. We only note that there are both similarities and dissimilarities between the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Sacrament of the Altar.

Textual Notes

13. I tell people all the time that emotion is part of whom we are as humans. Jesus was a human, and He not only caused, He felt emotion. How do you think Jesus felt when He heard that John the Baptizer was dead? And it was one thing for John to die, but the way he was murdered and the circumstances surrounding it were particularly gruesome.

Do you suppose that on some level Jesus felt responsible for that death? If it had not been for Him, would John still be alive? To be sure, John was arrested and later killed because he spoke against Herod's marriage to Herodias, who was married to Herod's brother. But hooking his wagon to Jesus like John did surely placed a target on his back.

Matthew relates that death of John, and then "Ἀκούσας δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀνεχώρησεν ἐκεῖθεν ἐν πλοίῳ εἰς ἔρημον τόπον κατ' ἰδίαν – hearing, Jesus withdrew from there by boat into a desolate place Himself apart." We have seen the verb "ἀναχωρέω – to withdraw" before, and we have talked about it before, and Jesus and others do it quite often in the NT.

The word is used by Matthew to describe Joseph's fleeing to Egypt (2:12), and when John is first arrested, Jesus is said (4:12) to do it. The definition at bible hub includes "I

return, retire, withdraw, depart (underlying idea perhaps of taking refuge from danger or of going into retirement),” and the idea of taking refuge is more than just parenthetical.

He went out into the “ἐρημον,” what we would call “out in the country,” a civilized place lacking dense population. The word occurs thirteen times in the NT, and it is the word used by Matthew to describe the place where Jesus went to be tempted (Mt 4), and more notably, it is word used to describe the place where John the Baptizer preached (Mt 11).

Matthew makes it clear that the reason why Jesus goes there is that He wants to be by Himself. Americans well understand the concept of going off to an area like this for the express purpose of getting away from people. We do it all the time. Not limited to, but especially Pastors, who are on the job 24/7, can well understand what’s going on here.

Cause pathos in the hearer by talking about them – maybe about you – getting away like this, and it will help them to better understand Jesus. The family that takes the vacation, the parents who need time away from the demands of their children, even the idea that taking time off from work are all familiar concepts, and the sabbath is a day of rest.

We sometimes get the idea that Galilee was very sparsely populated, and while there were many places that were “country,” that does not mean the entire area was uncivilized. Barclay says, “Josephus tells us that in his time and within that small area (Galilee) there were 204 towns and villages, none with a population of less (sic) than 15,000 people.”

Keep those numbers in mind when we hear that about fifty thousand people are present for the Feeding of the 5,000, wondering where that many people would have come from. Barclay adds, “In such a thickly populated area it was not easy to get away from people for any length of time” in a Galilee measuring “50 miles (long) and 25 miles (wide).”

Jesus gets away, but the withdrawal and the seclusion never seem to last very long, as is the case here. Matthew uses the plural “crowds” from plural “towns” to relate to us the scope of those who sought Him out, “καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ ὄχλοι ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ περὶ τῶν πόλεων – and the crowds, hearing of it, followed Him on foot from the towns.”

He leaves and journeys into that place, and given the geography and topography, the boat was the preferred method of travel. Not everybody had a boat, and Matthew is going to tell us (14) that He went ashore, and if you didn’t have a boat, then you walked. Imagine the crowds from those towns, that mass of humanity making their way to where He was.

14. If you’ve ever been in a boat on the water, then you know that it can be very relaxing. People buy boats often not so much to fish, but just to relax. Perhaps Jesus dawdled or dallied, because in spite of His having a boat and they having only feet, they beat Him to the spot, “Καὶ ἐξελθὼν εἶδεν πολλὸν ὄχλον – and coming out, He saw a large crowd.”

Given the circumstances, and the purpose of His voyage – to get away – we would not be surprised to see Jesus get back onto the boat and head out to sea, but He didn’t. Instead,

showing Himself a better man than I “καὶ ἐσπλαγχνίσθη ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς καὶ ἐθεράπευσεν τοὺς ἀρρώστους αὐτῶν – and He had compassion on them and healed their sick.”

The verb is ἐσπλαγχνίσθη, the aorist passive indicative of “σπλαγχνίζομαι – to have compassion,” a word that occurs twelve times in the NT. Look up the twelve times and better understand the meaning of that emotion, and then pass along what you find out to your listeners so that they can better understand it. Pastors especially should have this.

It’s the word used to describe the emotion that Jesus felt when, “He saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd.” It is out of that same kind of compassion that Jesus heals their illnesses without being asked. It’s the reason why Pastors have a hard time taking a vacation or days off. We see people in need, we help them. So do non-Pastor Christians.

This must have been an exciting, energy-charged time, all this healing. Some of these diseases may well have been debilitating, life-threatening or may even have rendered the patient imminently terminal. We can well imagine sick person after sick person, a hundred stories of a hundred real people, being rid of a hundred different diseases.

15. It does not say here exactly how many sicknesses He cured, nor do we get any indication for how long He did the healings. We only know that He stopped when it got dark, “ὥψίας δὲ γενομένης – when evening had come” the disciples came to Him and noted that they were out in the country, and it’s getting dark, and they are uncomfortable.

Looking at some of the fourteen NT occurrences of “ὥψίας – evening”, especially the one that talks about that time of the day when the sky is – as the sailor’s proverb has come down to us – “red in at night” (Mt 16:2), and it’s pay time for day laborers, (Mt 20:8), you get the idea that the time of day we’re talking about here is sunset or thereabouts.

Mark (1:32) has “when the sun had set” standing in apposition to the time of day said to be “ὥψίας – evening,” not this word. The coming of darkness was making the disciples antsy. When darkness comes, we turn on the lights, and we have a lot of lights. Because of our lights, most of the things you can do in the day you can do in the night as well.

Not so much in that time and place. Night is coming, and they tell Jesus “ἀπόλυσον οὖν τοὺς ὄχλους, ἵνα ἀπελθόντες εἰς τὰς κώμας ἀγοράσωσιν ἑαυτοῖς βρώματα – therefore, dismiss the crowds so that going into the villages, they might buy food for themselves.” KJV has them buying “victuals.” I like it. Were the disciples trying to get Jesus to rest?

They could have procured torches and the healing could have continued into the night. Remember that one time when He healed through the night and stopped at dawn? Recall that Jesus had come to this place for rest, but He keeps working. Telling Him to send people into town for food – were they actually just trying to get rid of these masses?

Which is not to deny that they people were hungry. Hunger, historically, is a condition common to man, and in many parts of the world today, it still is. It’s not a supply issue;

because of the way God created it, there is plenty of food in the world. It's rather a distribution issue; the Strong Man secures more food than he needs and does not share.

It's the same issue today. There's plenty of food out there – an abundance – but people still go hungry because the modern Strong Man does not share. Like Pharaoh, the modern tyrants control the people by controlling the food. The latest tyrant to do that can be found in Venezuela, and it's sort of what Communists from Stalin to Mao et al do.

16. Given the numbers, there was an insufficient supply of food out in the country, but that was neither new nor profound. Nor was it unknown that food could be had in town, as the crowds would have well known without Jesus telling them. But it's not so much about the food as it is about getting rid of the crowds, so that they could all get a break.

As the familiar story unfolds, Jesus tells them, "Οὐ χρειαν ἔχουσιν ἀπελθεῖν· δότε αὐτοῖς ὑμεῖς φαγεῖν – they have no need to go away, you give them to eat." To review; they use the Imperative Mode to tell Him what to do, He responds by using that same mode to tell them what to do, and what He tells them to do – they did the math, and it can't be done.

17. They must have expected Jesus to also be able to do that math, and their response to His suggestion is nothing short of incredulous, "Οὐκ ἔχομεν ὧδε εἰ μὴ πέντε ἄρτους καὶ δύο ἰχθύας – We have nothing except five loaves and two fishes." Those two foods were among the few staples – they ate a lot of fish and bread – and that wasn't very much food.

In fact, if we consider the men having this conversation to be the Apostles, then that would not have been enough even for them. Fish was a staple source of protein, the carbs in the bread fueled you, and you got fruits and vegetables when they were in season. Maybe it was they who were hungry, and they wanted to go into town for additional grub.

18. Another command from Jesus to them, "Φέρετέ μοι ὧδε αὐτούς – Bring them here to me." The things to be brought to Jesus are described by the pronoun "αὐτούς – them," a masculine plural. Grammatically it can refer any plural combination of the following nouns: the crowds, the loaf, or the fish, or in this case it can refer to all of those things.

It makes more sense for Jesus to tell the disciples to bring the crowd to Him and less sense that He told them to bring the food. There wasn't much food, and it couldn't have been located far away. The real logistical undertaking would have been to bring 50,000 people to Him, especially if they are scattered throughout the wilderness, and it's dark.

19. He commands them to sit down on the grass, then "λαβὼν τοὺς πέντε ἄρτους καὶ τοὺς δύο ἰχθύας, ἀναβλέψας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εὐλόγησεν – He takes the five fish and the two fish, looking up into heaven He spoke a blessing," meaning that He "blessed" the food. It's what you do before meals at home and there is perhaps also a sacramental aspect to it.

Then He proceeded to break the bread and gave it to "τοῖς μαθηταῖς – the disciples," who "τοῖς ὄχλοις – to the crowds." That sentence is grammatically incomplete, lacking a verb.

The verb that would be expected to be there to tell us what specific action the disciples took with the bread towards the people is not there, making this sentence an ellipsis.

Clearly the disciples “gave” (the missing verb) the bread to the people, and the effect of using the figure is to closely tie the *giving* of the bread from Jesus to the disciples with the *giving* of the bread from the disciples to the people. From the hand of Jesus to the hand of the disciples to that of the recipient are two actions, but really one unified action.

Our latest favorite show is *Call the Midwife*. Sometimes they preach at us, which is to be expected, but one of the things I’ve noticed is that “Christians” are portrayed in a positive light, and the Vicar is not a doofus, rare things in modern TV. I’ve also noticed from it and other British programming that the Brits use more ellipsis than we do, and it works.

20. Receiving the food, “ἔφαγον πάντες καὶ ἐχορτάσθησαν, καὶ ἦραν τὸ περισσεῦον τῶν κλασμάτων δώδεκα κοφίνους πλήρεις – they ate all and were satisfied, and they took up leftovers of the broken pieces, twelve basketfuls,” one for each Apostle? The verb for “satisfied” means they ate from the buffet until they were stuffed and could eat no more.

The word “leftovers” is the word used in the NT – generally of money but sometimes of other assets – when you have more than you need, and some is left over. From those few loaves and few fishes everybody ate until none of them could eat any more, and even at that there was food left over, in fact they ended up with more food than they started with.

As with the pronoun “αὐτούς – they,” the word “πάντες – all” is a masculine plural adjective and can modify those same three things. But since it is clear that the people did not eat all of the food, the “all” here must refer to the people. Every translation that I’m looking at gets it right, that “all the people” ate and were filled, so we’re good.

21. Using the figure of speech known as Climax, Matthew waits until the very end to tell us how many people there were. It’s one thing to talk about a “crowd” or “crowds” who then come together to form a very large crowd. He says the number, and 5,000 is a lot of people to feed on two fishes and five loaves, and you say that there were leftovers?

Then the hammer drops, “χωρὶς γυναικῶν καὶ παιδίων – without women and children.” We would say “not counting women and children.” I used to use the figure 25,000 but have since made it 50,000. In the general population at that time and place, there would have been somewhere in the neighborhood of ten “women and children” for each man.

Compare that to our rate of about one woman for every man, and each couple now have fewer than two children. So, if you had a gathering of 5,000 American men, you would probably have fewer than 20,000 in all, still a large crowd. But 50,000 is larger, and then compare a crowd of 50,000 to populations familiar to your hearers, then think logistics.

Think things like a city of 50,000, or a crowd that fills an MLB stadium. For rural preachers, what’s the population of your county? How much food would it take to feed

that many people, and how would twelve men go about distributing it? Probably, they would use helpers and the like. Now turn off the lights and ask the same questions.

The new mathematical equation goes something like this; 5 loaves + 2 fish – 12 baskets full = 50,000 fed. Besides the fact that there were twelve baskets full left over, there is probably significance to the number 12. 3 (God's number) X 4 (the number of Creation) = 12, the number of *God* working to provide for His *creation* by feeding them.

Law/Gospel

Nothing/Everything – When it comes to the physical needs of the body, we have nothing. Everything that we need to support these bodies and lives is provided to us by our Creator. When it comes to the spiritual needs of the soul, we likewise have nothing. Everything we need for salvation has been given to us by our Creator.

Shortage/Abundance – Life is filled with shortages, not having enough of things like food and the rest of our “daily bread.” We see that Jesus provides for body and soul, and not only enough, but an abundance.

This Life/That Life – Another way of saying the “shortage/abundance” dichotomy.

Sermon Titles

5 + 2 – 12 = 50,000

Do the New Math

He Multiplies

Jesus Tries to Take a Vacation

Hymns

Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread – LSB 625

What Is This Bread – LSB 629

Eat This Bread – 638

O Living Bread from Heaven – 642

Children of the Heavenly Father – 725

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Resources

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Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html