**Bread and Miracles** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Seventeeth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
2 Kings 4:42-44; John 6:1-12 Saint Paul, Minnesota
July 28, 2024

The traditional site of the feeding of the five thousand is marked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, at a place called *Tabgha:*

(see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabgha>).

There is a modern church there called the *Church of the Multiplication.* Inside you can see the ruins of an ancient fourth-century church, which were uncovered in 1932. A famous mosaic depiction of the miracle of bread and fish can still be seen there on a fragment of the original floor of the church. Pictures of this mosaic can be found on plates and plaques and Holy Land souvenirs of all kinds.

Tabgha is at the foot of the [Mount of Beatitudes](https://www.seetheholyland.net/mount-of-beatitudes/), about 3km south-west of [Capernaum](https://www.seetheholyland.net/capernaum/). The name is an Arab mispronunciation of the Greek *Heptapegon* (meaning *“seven springs”).* Several warm sulfurous springs enter the lake here, attracting fish, especially in winter.

In fact, this was a favorite spot for fishermen from nearby Capernaum, and its beach was familiar to Jesus and his disciples. It is easy to imagine Jesus speaking from a boat in one of the little bays, with crowds sitting around on the shore.

(see <https://www.seetheholyland.net/tag/multiplication-of-the-loaves-and-fishes/>).

Interestingly, this story of the loaves and fishes shows up in all four gospels, in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We know that is not the case with other events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Each of the four gospel writers tell their story of Jesus in their own particular way, for their own particular community: for example, only Luke and Matthew tell stories about the birth of Jesus; only John talks about the raising of Lazarus or the Samaritan woman. Matthew presents the *Sermon on the Mount,* but when Luke presents some of that same material it is called the *Sermon on the Plain.*

But something about this feeding story captured the attention of all the chroniclers who gathered up the stories about this Jesus and recorded them for their communities. They all kept alive this story of the loaves and fishes. *This is an important story.*

It was a story the early Christians told whenever they gathered to share some bread. They broke bread and remembered that day when bread was miraculously blessed and broken and shared all around. They broke bread and remembered that day, and they remembered the ancient stories about bread raining down from heaven on their ancestors, the bread called manna. They broke bread and told the story about Elisha and the barley loaves feeding hungry men. And so, bread miracles, hungry people getting filled up and satisfied, are important stories.

Now, I am a devoted student of modern biblical scholarship, of all that's gone on in the last 200 years right down to today's Jesus Seminar. I am grateful for the work of so many people like Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Riceour and Paul Tillich and Sallie McFague, Elizabeth Fiorenza, and Dom Crossan. And I am really grateful as a pastor and a preacher and as an observer of human life that Marcus Borg has managed to make biblical scholarship palatable and accessible for all of us, and especially for so many who had given up on the church. Thank God.

But something happened with those loaves of bread, and those portions of dried fish, something that caused them all to cherish this story and pass it on. What was it? Did Jesus say something and multiply all the loaves at once? Or did it happen gradually, as the loaves were passed around? Did the loaves grow? Did they multiply like the broom of Disney's sorcerer's apprentice? Did the baskets fill up and keep filling up as each person reached in?

We don't know. Matthew doesn't tell us. And neither does Mark or Luke or John or anybody since. *But there are some hints about what may have happened if you look closely.*

Recall that Jesus had been telling the people about the new way of God, he had been using images like the found treasure and the mustard seed to describe the abundance and the sheer joy God intends. Jesus had been announcing a new day where the grieving rejoice, the poor inherit the goods, the good win in the end. And then Jesus withdraws to a quiet place.

And the people follow. Just when Jesus might need to be alone, the crowds close in. And Jesus, showing them the largeness of God's heart, has compassion. He leaves his boat, goes ashore and mixes with them, blessing, touching, healing. Even at day's end, when the disciples want to call it quits and settle down for the night. This is when the real healing begins. Jesus knows they need food, and perhaps more than food, they need the nourishment of each other's company. They need not go away, he says. You give them something to eat.

And here is where we move into miracle. No waving of a magic wand, no *"Abracadabra, here's bread."* Just *"They need not go away. You give them something to eat."*

*These words,* not the incantation of a mere magician, *these words* are the words of miracle, the words of the kingdom of God. Jesus works wonders here as he hands the task right back to the disciples. He asks them to stay, to gather up what food they have, and then he blesses it. He gives thanks, there is food, there is plenty, for all. And there is more than enough.

There is something miraculous here, to be sure, something far more miraculous than the multiplication of loaves of bread and pieces of fish, something far more miraculous than numbers. *The disciples start passing the food, as if there is enough for everyone, and somehow there is.*

Now, we don't know how this is so. Perhaps they all really like this idea of being together here in a quiet place and they decide to share the pocketful of olives or raisins or bread or dried fish that they each carry; perhaps everyone reaches into their pocket for their own piece of bread and adds it to the basket as it passes by.

Whatever it was, they all eat and are satisfied, full, blessed at the end of the day in the company of the one who gives them this amazing sense of plenty, a feeling of *abundance.*

They don't feel hungry anymore. Imagine that. What a miracle. What a day. They had started off in a place of need, tired, sick, anxious, in need of healing, in need of compassion, in need of nourishment. And here they are, at day's end, full and satisfied with more than enough left over. They feel so full, in fact, that they can be generous with each other. They feel large enough to give something away. What could be more miraculous?

So full that they keep telling this story again and again, to anybody who will listen. This is a story of the kingdom, just like those parables about seeds, pearls, and treasure. But this time, they feel the treasure in their own bodies, in their own spirits.

Note that there is no *superhero* in this story. Nobody, no superman (or woman), swoops in and fixes the problem. Nobody gets to sit back and wait for some lightning bolt. *Nobody gets to say: well, I've worked for my bread. God will provide for them. I'm tired, I'm hungry, let's eat; well, okay, let us pray for those less fortunate. Send the crowds away. Send the problem away. That makes sense.* But nope. This does not make sense. God's new way does not make sense. It makes miracle.

The miracle here is not a loaf of bread multiplying by dozens, not changing one loaf into ten or ten into hundreds. The miracle is not even full bellies*. Miracle is allowing God's spirit to change us, to move among us and within us so that we change.* It's just like bread and wine. The miracle is not that it changes into body and blood; *the miracle is that it changes us.* Collect it all up and bring it all to me*. "They need not go away. You give them something to eat."*

Imagine that. Everybody in it together, meeting the needs of all, serving the common good. That's the miracle we need.

One final thought: If you look closely at the 4th century mosaic on the floor of the Church of the Beatitudes, you’ll notice a curious detail. It shows a basket of loaves surrounded by two fish. Ironically, the basket contains only four loaves. *So where is the fifth loaf?* The answer lies in the location of the mosaic. The mosaic is at the foot of the altar, and it incorporated *the table* rising above it. Where is the fifth loaf? It is on the table. It is the bread of thanksgiving that we share in Holy Communion.

So, this is a communion story as well, as you likely intuited, just like the first miracle story in John: *the changing of the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana.* Bread and wine. Wine and bread. These are stories of *abundance*; they turn the economics of *scarcity* on its head. There is more than enough for all—for those who have eyes to see.