

“Not Bread Alone” (2Aug2020)  
Matthew 14:13-21



I'd like to take a personal moment reflecting on the photo from the Church of the Multiplication. As I selected it, I started to tear up at memories from the Holy Land trip last November and other times. In a beautiful chapel, for 1500 years this ancient mosaic has marked the feeding of the 5000, recently facing an attack by radical Israelis. It's such a moving place for me.

With my loaves and fishes mosaic photos, one from earlier that morning was after I swam for the first time in the Sea of Galilee, out at dawn, like another story of Jesus meeting disciples after Easter for breakfast.



I also took a photo of my own breakfast that morning, the kind I love more than any other, with hummus and olives and olive oil with za'atar and bread to soak it up and laban (or yogurt), with cucumbers (or “kyar,” as the Palestinians say) perhaps grown by farmers right in that area. That



breakfast picture made my mouth water, and it took me back to that spot, that morning.

I share that not to make you jealous. Or hungry! I hope it wasn't irrelevant for being far distant from your life and the breakfast you had this morning. Just the opposite; I want us to picture the place of food, real food and real people, and Jesus really responding to that.

For one observation, even though this was a miracle, it wasn't just magical or ethereal. It involved bodies and eating. And work, distributing and the clean-up crew. One writer cleverly put it this way:

If Jesus was going to miraculously make food appear—why not have it appear in the stomachs—no work for the disciples and no garbage to clean up. Jesus could have waved his hand and the magic words, “Colonel Sanders,” and every family would have their own bucket of chicken right in front of them.<sup>1</sup>

To my point about real people, we might ask if ancient people around the Sea of Galilee would've enjoyed a bucket of chicken, even with 11 secret herbs and spices. We get focused on the miraculous “what” and forget much of any “who.” It is easy to make it about the miraculous bread but not its purpose: that Jesus wanted to feed hungry people.

David Keesey-Berg mentioned NBC news predicted the risk of starvation could nearly double in the pandemic, with some 270 million in our world facing death from lack of food and nutrition, needing relief efforts.<sup>2</sup> The news showed heart-wrenching images of emaciated children (of course mostly with dark skin, simultaneously prompting interrogation of our global economic order and also of our stereotypes of who is readily portrayed as lesser). But with this news story, the UN food programs aren't about feeding those children on screen, much less offering me a way to help. The children are just stand-ins, a foil for empathy. It reminds me of a Boondocks cartoon that used to hang on my office door where the granddad says, “You better clean your plate. There's starving people in Africa.” And the grandson replies, “You gonna take it over there?”

<sup>1</sup> Brian Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt14x13.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/mass-starvation-predicted-due-to-economic-effects-of-pandemic-88662597504>



Closer to home, Intern Lisa and I were talking this week about the possible MCC outdoor pizza oven envisioned by some Confirmation students and mentors. Lisa wondered how it might serve our neighbors as outreach from the MCC. It prompted a pondering on whether it would include the affluent or just needy neighbors.

See, in food distribution, we often wind up wondering about worthiness. With the disciples handing out bread and fish, some would want to collect a urine sample for drug testing or make people prove they're looking for a job so they wouldn't come to be lazy relying on Jesus' miracle. Another end of the spectrum of salary status might decry a person who could've afforded to supply their own supper and shouldn't be taking from others, making demands on the system. Of course, both sides were probably in the crowd of 5000: people who were desperate and people who could skip a meal or two.

We might further ask why Jesus didn't go out with the leftovers to the 5001<sup>st</sup> person who was also hungry and missed the miracle.

We could chase these imaginary details, or could leave it resolved that Jesus fed actual people—people who may've taken the day off work to be there or interrupted other weekend plans or who had nothing better to do. People who had a nice hummus breakfast. People who yelled at their kids on the way there and got bored while he was talking and felt ashamed they couldn't stop their growling stomachs. People who really needed a change from what life had been.

We can't say who those 5000 men (plus women and children!) were or what they needed, their experiences or emotions. We can say Jesus was not just showing off but responding to need. That was his purpose. I've been slow to realize it before, but this story is not about bread. The miracle isn't the

point. It's about people and Jesus trying to offer goodness to them.

You may contemplate the disciples' diligence in food distribution and how you can also do that. And I will again encourage you to think of ELCA World Hunger for farther neighbors, and the Lussier pantry for close ones, and Porchlight and more.

But I won't neglect that it's also you. For your own need and hunger, I'd like to connect in communion, not least because in communion as in this story, Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to be eaten. The same verbs exactly. While communion may not directly be for satisfying hunger (though that was part of its purpose in the early church, with a big potluck and actual meal), still communion is certainly about Jesus showing up to offer goodness that meets your need.

So tomorrow, we'll have a brief communion service. Monday at 5pm. From some, I've heard you need the promise of this meal, of Jesus' presence and love and forgiveness and grace and his life within you. From some, I've heard you need the community of communion, to see each other and share and be together. Some may need to have a chance for worship condensed to a few simple minutes and not last an hour in your very full days. Some may need the connection to something larger than yourself, both reorienting you in your lament and sadness and guiding you to God's will of care and sharing with the world. For some, none of those will be what you need. And I'll directly say I can't always meet your needs, and church itself may likely let you down.

But in all of it, we trust Jesus is responding to offer you goodness.