



Proper 13 / A

Which Invitation to Accept? Which Dinner to Attend?

2 August 2020

Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:8-9, 15-22; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

For the past several Sundays, our Gospel readings have focused on Jesus' parables as recorded by Matthew. But in today's Gospel lesson, we turn from parable to miracle, with Matthew's version of the feeding of the five thousand.

This account of the feeding of the multitude occurs in all four Gospels, each with its own emphasis. And Matthew and Mark like the story so much, in fact, that they each tell it twice, with only slight variations: in one version Jesus feeds five thousand people, and in the other, four thousand. That means this story is told six times; in only four Gospels. That should be a clue for us that perhaps there's more going on in this story than an entertaining fairy tale.

In today's Gospel it helps us to understand the impact of this event by contrasting it with what has just occurred. Matthew precedes this account with the sordid story of the beheading of John the Baptist at the conclusion of a birthday party for Herod. There was plenty to eat and drink at that exclusive palace event, and there was even entertainment - an exotic dancer – Herod's stepdaughter Salome - whose dancing pleased Herod so much that he stupidly promises to do

whatever she asked. And she got what she asked for – or more correctly, what her mother wanted - John the Baptist's head on a platter. The contrast between this horrid and bloody event in a Jerusalem banqueting hall and Jesus' meal on a pastoral meadow in the Galilean countryside is stunning.

Jesus has returned to Galilee, partly to ensure his safety. It was not a safe time to be in the capital city where prophets are being beheaded. And when it's your own cousin who loses his head, for preaching the same message of repentance, you know you could be next! So, Jesus and his disciples head north and go back home to Galilee, where they all have left their family and friends, where it is relatively safe, and where Jesus can grieve over his cousin's death.

It is here, around the Sea of Galilee, that another feeding event takes place, only with vastly different dynamics. Unlike Herod's little birthday bash, at this one there is healing instead of debauchery. Along with their stomachs, people's souls are fed by Jesus' words, and no one must fear that the party favors may include a severed head served up on a silver platter. Another contrast is that, while Herod's party probably included abundant food and drink, this event does not focus on tables overflowing with food. To be honest, it's not even a good church potluck! But the point of this miracle story is not about what food was served.

What this passage is about is the ironic truth that out of human scarcity can come the abundance of God's grace. This is a compelling message for people who have little and struggle with not enough in our world of over-abundant living. Jesus has compassion on the people because of their scarce resources. But instead of letting scarcity define or set limits on the mission, he simply says to the disciples, "*You give them something to eat.*"

That statement - *"You give them something to eat"* - is the heart of this miracle. Jesus is saying those words to us today, just as clearly as he said them to his disciples on the deserted shores of the far side of the Sea of Galilee all those centuries ago.

"You give them something to eat." As was true in Jesus' day, there is still a hungry world out there, and it is our responsibility, our duty, to feed them. This hunger is both spiritual and physical. And although it may look like there's not enough to go around, the miracle we hear recounted today teaches us that, in fact, if we open our eyes, we will see that there is enough - that God has already provided enough to feed every last person on earth. It just depends on how you divide it up; whether we will share God's grace or hoard it.

Even churches and faith communities can get caught up in this scarcity trap. One hears people saying: "If we just had more money, we could do this." "If we just had more volunteers, we could do that." "If we just had more time, this could be done." "If we just had more – fill in the blank, that would happen."

Now, here's an interesting fact: carefully examine every verse of the Gospels, but you will never hear Jesus say that. With Jesus, whatever is present is always enough, whether it be food or faith equivalent to a grain of mustard seed! Wherever Jesus is present, there is always enough.

And so, in the most remote places - places we've never even heard of - the Bible is studied; in places where perhaps only one or two people have a copy of the Bible, the faith is taught. The faith is taught and shared where there are no colorful Sunday school materials, and people are brought into the Body of Christ even though there is no building for worship. The essential, most basic things of the Christian

faith do not depend on elaborate or costly resources because Jesus and the Good News of the Gospel story are the only resources needed.

And notice in this account how the disciples respond quickly to what Jesus asks of them. They don't quibble, whine, or walk away. The compassion of Christ is so intense that they can do nothing more than also show and share it, and in doing what they are asked to do they discover, as one writer put it, "compassion beyond their wildest dreams."

This miracle happens continually in the Church. Time, volunteers, money . . . there is never enough, and yet the things that God asks us to do, to care for the marginalized, the poor, the despondent, the lost, the lonely, these things can – and often do – continue to be done, even in a context of scarcity. Just this past January, several of us from Messiah traveled to Guatemala where we worked for a week among the poorest of that country. We built stoves in homes, eliminating the need to cook over open fires exposing families to burns and chronic lung diseases. Cost? Less than \$200.00 for each stove. In other homes, we demonstrated and installed simple but effective water filtration systems. Cost? About \$40.00. These things do not cost much and you, this congregation, provided the funds for several stoves to be built and water systems distributed. Through your generosity, through your compassion in Christ's name, the quality of life is greatly improved for over 60 families. And experience shows that frequently, before very long, these people will ask the church to come and teach them more about Jesus and the Gospel. This is a sustainable method of compassion and care, very much based on Jesus' work.

Certainly, the teaching for us is to rely less on material resources and more on the compassion of Christ in our work for God's Kingdom. Size does not matter, whether it is budgets or buildings. Even in the leanest of circumstances, the people of God can give the care God asks us to

give. We can show the compassion and love of Christ without expending large amounts of resources.

But there is another facet to this Galilean scene. It is obvious that this account contains Eucharistic images. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it, and it is this bread that is then distributed and miraculously feeds all those who gather around and follow him. This orderly event, making the people sit down, reverently offering and praying over the food, and then breaking and distributing it, is another contrast with Herod's bacchanal and hedonistic feast. Which gathering would have fed your soul? To which feast would you want to be invited? Where would you most likely feel honored and cared for? In Herod's magnificent gilded palace, or on the shore of a lake seated on the ground?

Everyone on the lakeshore that day had something in common: they were in a precarious position. Many were sick with the horrible diseases of the time. There were always threats of rebellion and violence, even in the relative calm of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples were always in need of a place to stay and were wary of the reality that they too might be arrested and put in prison, accused of stirring things up.

There are so many like them today. When we think of living a precarious existence, our thoughts will often go to developing countries of the Third World, but we need not go that far. There are many people today – here in our own country, right here in our own community – who have lost their jobs or who live in fear of being handed a pink slip this week or next. Many households live only one paycheck away from disaster. Many small business owners are only one more mandated restriction or closure from shutting their doors for good. In many American towns there are many more homeless people than six months ago, including children, who must sleep in their car or under a

bridge, who roam the streets, and search all day for the most basic necessities. There are people, many of them elderly, who depend on expensive medicines to keep them from the ravages of illness or disease, but who are forced to choose each day between buying groceries or the medication that keeps them alive.

These are the people for whom this Gospel and its image have much meaning. But truthfully, each and every one of us should be acutely aware of the fragile nature of our lives, and our need to rely on the compassionate Christ. Each of us can place ourselves in the crowd by the lake that day, watching, hearing Jesus' words, receiving his healing touch, learning that God loves us very much. And we can all find ways to celebrate that truth with minimal resources, maximum joy, and a compassion for others.

Herod's feast is exclusive, a private gala for the rich and the powerful, and leads to death. Jesus' feast is inclusive, a community picnic for the poor and the oppressed, and leads to life. Which invitation would you most like to receive? Which party would you most like to attend?

Every time we take the Eucharist, we reenact Jesus' picnic on the lakeshore. Just like on that day, Jesus takes our bread, blesses it, breaks it, and shares it with all who are hungry. And even in this pandemic, when we are, for safety's sake, prevented from receiving the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus is calling us to do the same with our lives – take the many blessings God has given you, break them open, and share them with others. Jesus is inviting you today: Come to the party where no one goes hungry, where all are miraculously fed, where there is compassion, and love, and grace, and joy, and life for all.

Amen.