

Proper 13, Year A  
August 2, 2020  
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church  
Matthew 14:13-21  
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“Miracles of Abundance”

While in my first year of seminary I took one of the most amazing opportunities of my life to travel to Turkey as part of a study seminar to learn about the travels of the Apostle Paul and the history of early church in the area. There is really no describing what it is like to be standing in places like Ephesus, that have until then had only been names on the pages of scripture for me, to be surrounded by the culture and context that shaped the earliest believers. While many of the sites of Roman city ruins started the blur together in a jumble of white marble columns in my mind, I did notice certain patterns emerging the symbology etched in stucco and mosaic tile of the earliest church sites. Surprisingly, what is the most recognizable symbol for today’s church – the cross, was not as prevalent as other symbols, most notably – water, bread, and fish.

Today’s scripture text may illuminate for us why these symbols were so central to the early Church community. This miracle story of “the Feeding of the 5000” is one of the few that is told in all 4 gospels, marking its importance and significance to the early Church’s understanding of who Christ was and who they were as disciples. It’s one that I’m sure many of you are familiar with as well. To this day it remains one of the more central stories we tell and know from the scriptures, as we return to this story again and again in our children’s Sunday school classes, with our youth, and at least once a year in the cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. The challenge that comes with such a story is what new can be revealed to us? What new lessons can we learn? Or even what old lessons do we need to relearn?

Returning to this “old friend” of a scripture text what was illuminated for me this time was the first few lines, lines that I often glossed over in my quest to get to the real meat and action of this story – let me read them for you from another translation – the Common English Bible –

<sup>13</sup> When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. <sup>14</sup> When Jesus

arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick.

What Jesus “heard about John” was his death, which occurs in the preceding verses. John’s gruesome and traumatic execution at the hands of King Herod, in a scene that could be ripped from pages of a Game of Thrones script, likely left Jesus with a kind of grief and terror we can only imagine, knowing his close friend, cousin, even mentor, was dead and killed in such a way, we can begin to understand his need to escape and get away to a “deserted place.” It is here in this wilderness that the stage has been set for Jesus to demonstrate compassion, healing, and God’s miracles of abundance that stand in stark contrast to the darkness and scarcity that led Jesus, his disciples, and the crowd to this place.

The Wilderness is more than just a place in the Bible, it is symbolic of change, transition, of moving from one not only physical place to another, but a complete reorientation from one way of life to another. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness, as they transitioned from Pharaoh’s economy of slavery and scarcity to God’s economy of liberation and abundance. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, leaving behind any ambitions for earthly power to submit himself completely to God’s will as he set his feet on the path of his ministry, knowing it would lead him to the cross.

I think in many ways we are living in a wilderness time. My husband and I sort of joke that one day our children and grandchildren will ask what it was like to live in the year 2020, that there will be whole text books written about and college courses dedicated to the events of this year and all the socio-economic and political factors that have brought us here. We know the world around us changing, we ourselves are changing. Some of this change has been a long time coming and some of it seems to have come out of nowhere, as we have spent the last several months completely rearranging our lives. We cannot return to the ways of the past and yet the way forward is still unclear, still unfolding, and that uncertainty is frightening. And so we grieve and we worry, we find joy where we can and we make the best of things, as we do the best we can for ourselves and our families. I think I certainly have more sympathy now for the Israelites in their grumbling and complaining in the wilderness as these realities of our world start to weigh on me – when we will get there? When will this all end? And just as God

provided for the Israelites in their wilderness, with quail and manna, with water, and a way forward, Jesus reminds us of this same care and compassion of our Creator as he heals the crowds and all are fed starting with the gifts of just a few fish and loaves of bread.

When the crowds show up in the wilderness, they too are reacting to John's death, perhaps they are angry, riled up, and also grieving a beloved teacher and leader – after all John had quite the following long before Jesus came on the scene, Jesus reacts to their intrusion upon his solitude not out of fear or even annoyance or resentment, but instead he is moved to compassion. He sees their grief, their ailments, and their hunger and meets those needs with care and love. Miracles abound as the Holy Spirit moves through the hearts of those in the crowd and the hearts of the disciples as each are reoriented from a mindset of the scarcity of the kingdoms of this world, to one of the abundance of God's beloved community – where all are healed and made whole and not only is there enough to go around, but there are leftovers and all are left satisfied.

How might we be surprised by miracles of abundance and be reoriented towards God's abundant kingdom during this wilderness time? I find that when I start to drift towards those feelings and the mentality of scarcity – will what I have be enough for me and my family to weather the unexpected days ahead? Will I have the energy and creativity to keep serving the church and caring for folks as we continue practice social distancing? This story shouts the good news that with God, there is always enough!

The symbols of the loaves and fishes are central to the Christian faith, because they not only point to who God is – the one who provides us life and life abundant, but they also point to who we are supposed to be – those who participate in this abundance with our own generosity and self-giving. When the disciples see the crowd they ask Jesus, "what are we going to do with all these people? They are hungry, it's getting late, we should just send them all home." And Jesus' answer is – "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat." Jesus is empowering his disciples to join him in this miracle work. They are to play an important role in making sure all are fed in the wilderness, there's no need to send anyone away hungry, but it will require intelligence and creativity and the support of the whole community

The miracles of abundance are all around us, and I see them in the cases of water and grocery sacks full of food that showed up on my front porch day after day in the early months of the pandemic to support those experiencing homelessness and food scarcity in our city, in the batches of cookies and muffins coming from the kitchens of both our youth members and our elderly members going to the weekly Grace and Greens meal at Okra Abbey, in the countless numbers of phone calls made by church and staff members to check-in on folks and get them connected to our ZOOM meetings and YouTube worship videos, in the faces of those popping up on my screen for Sunday School classes and discussion groups, as we continue to grow in our faith and life of discipleship and exploring where Christ is leading us in these times, and in the church library bursting at the seams with supply donations for our Carrollton Camp which providing an important service to families stretched to their emotional and economic limits during this time. This are all miracles to me and reminders that even in this wilderness God is present, leading us through and providing for our needs along the way.