

Enough for Every One
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Matthew 14:13-33

“Why worry about the loaves and fishes?” Mary Oliver once wrote.

“Why worry about the loaves and fishes?

If you say the right words, the wine expands.

If you say them with love

and the felt ferocity of that love

and the felt necessity of that love,

the fish explode into many.

Imagine him, speaking,

and don’t worry about what is reality,

or what is plain, or what is mysterious.

If you were there, it was all those things.

If you can imagine it, it is all those things.

Eat, drink, be happy.

Accept the miracle.

Accept, too, each spoken word

spoken with love.”

I really like that poem by Mary Oliver. As with a lot of poems, I don’t feel confident that I know what it *MEANS* . . . but that seems to be part of the point. I’m reminded of advice Billy Collins has given about poetry – that we hold a poem up to the light like a color slide, or press our ear against its hive, or drop a mouse into a poem and watch him probe his way out, or waterski across a poem’s surface, waving at its author’s name on the shore. That may be apt advice for miracle stories, too! Mary Oliver’s poem helps me **HOLD CHRIST’S MIRACLE** up to the light like a color slide. You can marvel at the jewel tones of it . . . you can wonder how *LOVE SHONE THROUGH SOMETHING SMALL* to create something big.

When Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were pondering how to tell the story of Jesus, they had to weigh (as all poets and story-tellers must weigh) what to include, and what to leave out. I’m sure none of the gospel writers shared *EVERYTHING* he had heard and remembered about Jesus. About *ONE STORY*, they were in agreement: today’s story, where Jesus feeds a multitude in the desert. It’s actually the only miracle story that all four gospel writers tell, which means it must have been a very important story in the early church.

One reason it was important is that it was the kind of story that made you think about other stories. Like when you’re at a special dinner with your family, say Thanksgiving dinner, and somebody rubs their belly and says, “*These sweet potatoes remind me of the kind Grandma used to make.*” And someone else says, “*Remember that time she forgot they were in the oven, and the marshmallows on top were completely burnt?*” And

somebody else chimes in, “*She always used **twice** the amount of marshmallows the recipe called for . . . said she wanted them to be extra sweet, because **WE** were extra sweet.*”

When the early Christians heard the story about Jesus feeding the multitudes, they’d feel a wash of love amidst memories like that. Someone would say, “*This reminds me about God – how God freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, parted the waters, led them into the wild ... And they were hungry, **SO hungry** in the wilderness, but **GOD GAVE THEM FOOD** – enough for everyone, for every day! Manna they called it – manna from heaven!*” And somebody else would say, “*Remember Elisha, too! That time a man brought some loaves and ears of grain to the prophet, and Elisha told the man to give his food to the crowd. And the man said, “How can so little food feed so many people?” But Elisha promised there’d be leftovers, and there were.*” A hush might settle after that story. Then someone would speak into the silence: “*When Jesus was at the table with his disciples, he took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them, saying, This is my body, given for you; do this in remembrance of me.*”

Christ’s miracle about the loaves and fishes . . . when you press your ear against its hive, you hear it buzzing with the whole history of the people of God, and *especially* with reminders of God, who is not only *MOVED* to meet human needs, but also *ABLE to meet human needs*. Through the ages, these stories have reminded God’s people that when God promises God’s creatures *LIFE in all its fullness* . . . we have good reasons to take God seriously.

“Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes? If you say the right words, the wine expands. If you say them with love and the felt ferocity of that love and the felt necessity of that love, the fish explode into many.” At least they did, when Jesus said them. This story reminds us that Jesus was powerful, and his miracles reflect God’s intent and ability to feed hungry people.

But that’s not all this story reveals. It also reminds us that *Jesus did not act alone*. Jesus did not gather the loaves, multiply the loaves, and distribute the food to all those people by himself. He asked his disciples to bring what *THEY* could find. He took what the disciples found and brought to him, and Jesus blessed, broke, and gave it *BACK* to them. *CHRIST’S DISCIPLES* gave the food to the crowds – enough to satisfy everyone, and even more. Perhaps Jesus *COULD HAVE DONE* all of that by himself . . . but that isn’t what he *WANTED*. Jesus chose to perform this miracle *with his disciples’ help*.

The story reveals something crucial about discipleship – that it requires Christ’s followers to *GET OUT THERE* – to be involved in the work Christ is doing . . . to encounter people who hunger (for understanding, for meaning, for justice, for food). Christ’s disciples are challenged to reach out to the hungry . . . and also, to trust that, when we reach out, we’ll have something to give!

One of my colleagues in Presbyterian Church, a pastor named Felipe Martinez has this annoying and inspiring habit: whenever we reach a crossroads in our work, and we aren’t sure whether we have what it takes to try the new thing we think God may want us to try .

... if he senses undue anxiety, Felipe will say, “I believe in a God of abundance.” I feel chagrined almost every time, because I realize I’ve been operating from a mindset of scarcity. *Do I believe in a God of abundance? What might **THAT GOD** be hoping I’ll do?*

Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote a beautiful sermon about this story of the loaves and fishes, where she shared how necessary it’s been to her personally to accept, first of all, that God **CAN** perform miracles. ‘Cause there are plenty of ways to explain what happened in the wilderness as rather ordinary. (Like: one person shared, then more people felt compelled to share, and before long it was one big, wilderness potluck.) But Nadia said she’s come to value the fact that ***GOD IS DIFFERENT FROM US*** . . . that, “We have a God who can actually feed so many with so little . . . a God who created the universe out of nothing, who can put flesh on dry bones and life in a dry womb . . . a God who looks upon things we dismiss as ‘nothing’ or ‘insignificant’ or ‘insufficient’ and says ‘Ha! Now ***THAT*** I can **DO** something with.’” It’s important to remember our God is such a God.

Also, says Nadia, it’s important to remember that ***AS GOD CALLS US*** to the work of discipleship . . . *and as we feel ourselves overwhelmed* by the hunger of the multitudes, and by how little we seem to have at our disposal to help – how little compassion or skill or will – God looks upon us with unfailing grace and love. We need to remember, she says, that when Jesus looks out and asks, “Where are these hungry people going to get food?” he is including US in the category of hungry people and HIMSELF in the category of bread.

“When I rely only on my strengths” [Nadia says . . .] when I think I have only my small stingy little heart from which to draw love for the people around me, when the waters are rough and storms are real and I am scared – filled with fear of what is happening or not happening in [my life, my home, my work, ... when I’m] filled with fear that I don’t have what it takes to live as God wants me to live, I have forgotten about Jesus – my Jesus who’s making something out of my nothing and walking towards me in the storm. That’s our guy. The Man of sorrows, familiar with suffering, friend of scoundrels and thieves, forgiver of his own executioners, resurrected on the third day... the great defeater of death and griller of fish and savior of sinners.

Jesus feeds us, so we can feed others.

I want to come back briefly to one of the parables from last Sunday – the one where Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour, until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough.” That parable comes back to me this Sunday, as I think about the miraculous ***RIGHTNESS*** – all the light and love and justice and goodness of God’s kingdom – that God has ***HIDDEN*** in creation . . . even in our small, stingy little hearts and in our homes and workplaces and suburbs and city streets.

Robert Farrar Capon wrote about this, asking first: do you know how much a bushel is? I had to look it up. It’s about 8 dry gallons – some 128 cups of flour. After you’d mixed in

all the water you'd need, you'd have more than 100 pounds of dough. Capon sees this as a metaphor for creation. It's into *ALL THE CREATED WORLD* that God's kingdom of heaven is hidden, like yeast a woman worked all the way through. From the start, Capon suggests: God's power and purposes have been kneaded into creation like yeast, hidden in flour, becoming dough.

And we're essential to the growth of the kingdom. We're essential to the way God's purposes play out! Because, "How does yeast lighten dough?" Capon asks. By filling the dough with thousands of tiny pockets of carbon dioxide. And how do those pockets of gas cause bread to rise? By expanding when heated. WARM CARBON DIOXIDE. That may remind you of something. It may remind you of breath! It reminds ME of breath entering and leaving human lungs – *OUR BREATH* even. And perhaps, thinking about breath in the company of other Christians on a Sunday morning will remind you of Christ's breath, and how the risen Christ *breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* And if you're steeped in the stories of scripture, *THAT STORY* about Jesus might remind you of *OTHER* stories, like the valley of dry bones, and God saying, "*I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again and know that I'm the Lord.*" You might also be reminded of the SPIRIT God sent over the deep sea – God's Spirit brooding over the waters of creation in the beginning of the world.

These are stories to assure us that God is here, powerfully breathing God's Spirit, powerfully providing for God's people. Why? So we can courageously live in service to one another as a way of serving Christ.

"I believe in a God of abundance," says my friend Felipe. *"Accept the miracle,"* says Mary Oliver. *"Don't be afraid,"* says Jesus Christ. *"That's our guy!"* says Nadia Bolz-Weber. And if Christ is "our guy" . . . if God is our God . . . let's be bold to imagine what WE are empowered to do.

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