

“When a Meal is More than a Meal”  
Delivered Sunday, July 31, 2011  
By Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

Matthew 14:13-21

Each of the four gospels, as you know, tells the story of Jesus’ life differently. Writing a couple of decades after the Letters of Paul, the gospel writers used some common sources and stories that circulated among the earliest Christians, and then crafted their words through particular understandings of who Jesus was – and is. Each wrote for different church communities, and interpreted the life of Jesus by choosing from memories that circulated about him.

The earliest gospel, Mark, has a style that’s distinctively hurried with Jesus never lingering anywhere for long, *immediately* heading quickly to the next place, as Mark rushes the reader to the cross and resurrection. Matthew and Luke do linger over things and like to tell stories. They share in great detail, for example, over Jesus’ long sermon which Matthew remembers Jesus gave on a mountain, and Luke recalls on wide open plain. They are also the only ones who record anything about Jesus’ birth. John’s lofty language delights in images as he recalls so many things not noted in the other gospels – like the wedding Jesus attended with his mother at Cana, and the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead.

Given their distinctive witness, it’s interesting that all four have one, and only one, miracle story in common the Feeding of the Five thousand. Not only that, Matthew and Mark basically recount the same story twice; in the second telling the crowd diminishes to mere 4,000. So important was this memory of Jesus feeding a huge crowd with barely enough food to feed the Twelve Disciples – much less 5,000 men, plus women and children – that this miracle alone is remembered by everyone. What that means, I believe, is that the light evening supper, blessed by Jesus in the middle of a deserted place, was more than a meal for people who were hungry for something more than food.

We all know meals like that the occasional family reunion that pulls cousins together too long parted by time and space; the holiday celebration where the feast is more lasting than whatever is passed around the table; those dinners among dear friends, filled with great laughter; the casseroles laid upon the table by the kindest of neighbors after some family member has died not unlike these the Feeding of the 5,000 was a meal that meant so much more than food enough for everyone, as miraculous as that was.

Matthew’s account of this story comes right after another very different kind of meal – King Herod’s birthday party. The palace is filled with raucous political types vying to stay within the good graces of Herod’s power. Herod was brutal, cruel and corrupt. He’d married his brother Philip’s wife after she divorced Philip, an act publicly criticized by John the Baptist. When her daughter’s dancing is so pleasing to the king, he is seduced into saying, “I’ll give you whatever you want!” – With the urging of her mother, Herod’s niece orders the head of John the Baptist to be passed around the party on a platter, as if for desert. The Romans were famously amused by the sport of violence and bloodshed, and we can only imagine that in the palace that night – filled with every imaginable excess of drunken debauchery – the death of this off-beat Jewish Prophet was met with great applause and laughter.

“Now, when Jesus heard this,” Matthew says, “he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” John was his cousin. He had baptized Jesus and inaugurated his public ministry. Half way through the gospel, Jesus knows the death of John foreshadows his own. Jesus was surely grieving and wanted to be left alone... but the crowds followed him in droves, even as they’d followed John into the wilderness, flocking to him in great number to hear about the dawning of a new day when the cruelty of the empire and the likes of Herod would be overmatched by the generous, gracious, abundant love and justice of God.

I imagine Jesus’ own grief over John helped him recognize the yearning of the crowds, for we’re told Jesus had compassion on them, he healed their sick, and when the disciples urged him to send them away to find their own supper, he gathered them closer together so they could pass loaves of bread around and eat their fill of something more than bread. Sometimes a meal is more than a meal.

Eugene Peterson tells a story of friends, Fred and Cheryl, who many years ago adopted five-year-old Addie from Haiti. Addie’s parents were killed in a traffic accident and left her without any family. They went to Haiti to pick her up, and as they walked across the tarmac to board the plane, the tiny orphan reached up and slipped her hands into the hands of her new parents. Cheryl and Fred came to call this innocent, fearless trust expressed in that tiny physical act of grasping their hands as her “birth” moment into their family, every bit as miraculous as when their two sons had emerged from the birth canal.

Later that evening in their Arizona home, they all sat down to their first supper together. The table was abundantly spread with food, and the older teenaged boys filled and refilled their plates while Addie watched with big eyes, having never seen so much food before. Her new parents noticed that Addie had become quiet and seemed agitated, maybe bewildered, and Cheryl rightly guessed that it was the rapidly disappearing food. She knew that a hastily vanishing meal in Haiti might have meant the last meal for a day or two or three. She took Addie’s hand and led her to the kitchen. She pulled out the bread drawer to show her the back up stash of three loaves. She opened the refrigerator, and showed her the milk and orange juice, fresh vegetables, jars of jelly, a carton of eggs. They went into the pantry with its bins of potatoes, onions and squash, shelves of peanut butter and canned goods all the time reassuring Addie that there was a lot of food in the house, no matter how much her new and much older brothers ate or how fast. She would never go hungry again. (1)

Cheryl did not just tell her – she placed the food for the day in her hands, and it was as if she were showing her the twelve baskets of leftovers after the multitude had been fed in the wilderness of grief and poverty, as if she were pointing to the difference between Herod’s violent feast and the ways of Jesus, and the world’s inequitable disparities that account for hunger in places Haiti, the Horn of Africa, even Columbia, as if she were soothing the insecurities we all face when the future seems uncertain and fearful.

Don’t you imagine that’s why all four gospel writers recall this story and the church enacts it again and again? It is as if Jesus himself is taking us through the pantry of God’s endless abundance saying, Come, child, you remember the bread in bread box, that manna that fell from heaven when Moses led you through the wilderness so that everyone had enough to eat for the day. You remember how Elijah took twenty barley loaves and a few ears of corn and fed a hundred people and collected leftovers to boot. You remember how you flocked to John in the wilderness and he baptized you with water, but filled you to the brim with a promise that another was coming to baptize you with Spirit, and to gather good wheat in his granary a storehouse for the kingdom of God – and burn the injustices of Herod like

### 3

chaff in the fire. The feeding of the 5,000 is a tour of God's storehouse, and in the presence of Jesus Christ, a meal is always more than a meal. It is a miracle that remembers that no matter what our wilderness, no matter how deserted our surroundings may seem, no matter how deep our grief, no matter how desperately we yearn to be healed, we never really eat alone.

The promises of God's abundance crowd in. Jesus took five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, he blessed and broke the loaves, and handed them to his disciples saying, "You give them something to eat." And so every week, we gather here and pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," so that the "US" in that prayer comes alive in our sharing real bread with the truly hungry, as well as a taste of tenderness, a morsel of kindness, a crumb of mercy, a whiff of justice, food for life and nourishment for the soul. (2)

AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Eugene Peterson, *Practicing Resurrection*, p. 159-160.
- 2) Lisa Nichols Hickman, images paraphrased from *The Worshipping Life*, p. 73.