

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Ken Hughes at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on August 6, 2023.

FEEDING TIME

1 Kings 17:8-16, Matthew 14:13-21

One of the first lessons I learned in seminary was that when a particular story about Jesus appears in three of the four gospels, it probably conveys a message or tells us something about Jesus that we should pay special attention to. Well, the feeding of the 5,000 goes one step further – it appears in all four gospels, including John, who usually is the odd man out when it comes to linkages among these scriptures.

So this event – feeding 5,000-plus people from a storehouse of five loaves and two fish – is extraordinary all by itself, but is made all the more so because of the importance the early Christians attached to it. It's hardly the only Jesus miracle story told in the New Testament, and yet it's the only one all four evangelists thought must be told in their account of Jesus' ministry.

Of course, the evangelists may have been inspired by the unmistakable echoes of a much, much older story. The first scripture reading featuring Elijah fairly bubbles with foreshadowings of Jesus. It illustrates why Elijah and Jesus often are spoken of in the same breath. First, you have Elijah's chance encounter with a particular woman, a foreigner, not an Israelite. The setting is the city of Zarephath, in a land that has been devastated by drought and famine. And what's the first thing Elijah asks of her – a cup of water – a gesture that will be repeated centuries later by Jesus with another foreigner, the Samaritan woman at the well.

But closer to the heart of the feeding of the 5,000 are the circumstances the woman agonizingly describes to Elijah: "I have...only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." If anything, her situation is far more dire than the hungry masses Jesus faced. But no matter, Elijah acts. He responds with a phrase and a promise that we will hear many times from Jesus' own mouth: "Do not be afraid."

And then, drawing on the power of the Sovereign he serves, Elijah instructs the woman to prepare what little she has, triggering an outpouring of abundance perfectly aligned with the feeding of the 5,000: "She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail..."

And so a text centuries older than its more famous cousin gives us the context for what Jesus does in a deserted place close by the shores of Galilee. But we still have the question – why does this particular story hold such privileged status in the gospels?

The scale of the miracle may be one factor – after all, it's not only 5,000 men according to the text who get a free fish meal; it's women and children as well, and we don't even know how many of them were present on the scene.

Then there's the physical multiplication that takes place, which is the most mind-boggling thing about this miracle – enough to feed that entire famished crowd with 12 bushels of food left over. So, again, the sheer size of the miracle could be what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John thought worth underlining.

But it could just as well be the tininess at the beginning of the story that caught the gospel authors' eyes. The fact that such a momentous supernatural outcome could emerge from such meager beginnings – a few loaves, a couple fish. Sort of reminds you of last week's parables about what a mustard seed, or a smidgen of yeast can produce.

Or maybe the evangelists were making a different point about small things; like the small amount of faith Jesus' disciples showed when they asked him if they should send the crowds away because of the lack of food on site. O ye of little faith!

Or maybe the point of all this was to allow Jesus to call an impromptu worship service – he told this massive crowd to be seated on the grass – and then in plain view of all of them he performed not only a miracle, but an act of worship as he directed his prayer heavenward and uttered words and made gestures that look and sound an awful lot like the sacrament of holy communion – which we happen to celebrate this morning. Could he have done this to encourage us to approach the Lord's Supper with the same awe and reverence for God he no doubt inspired in those gathered on that grassy field? Could that be the nugget of this story?

The truth, of course, is that this story could be all of these things, and more. I'm fairly certain that the first readers and listeners to the miracle were in need of reassurance of a God of mercy, a Savior who filled hollow spirits and empty stomachs. Can you imagine how folks in the early decades of the church – a dangerous time to be a believer – marveled over the God of compassion portrayed in this story? They've been given a portrait of the living Christ who not only satisfied spiritual hungers – which is what brought them to that grassy field in the first place – but who also makes provision for what they will eat.

And by the way, in case you thought the Elijah story offered just a passing resemblance to Jesus, read on for a few verses after today's lesson in 1 Kings. You'll find that the story of the woman and her son doesn't end with an inexhaustible source of food, but goes on to describe how her son falls mysteriously and mortally ill, and how – you guessed it – he is brought back from the dead by the same agent of God, Elijah.

That, I believe, is no coincidence. The arc or trajectory of the divine story – Old Testament to New Testament – is at least part of what the four gospel writers tried to capture and communicate. So if I had to select out of all the possibilities the miracle of the 5,000 offers, that's the one that grabs my attention, that speaks to my spirit. That God is the Creator of abundance in any age, and no matter how meager or bleak our present circumstances may appear, no matter how low our storehouse of spiritual or physical reserves may be, there is a God, and a Savior, whose repeated message throughout scripture is – turn to me, and I will feed you, body, mind, and soul. Amen.