

# The Making of a Miracle

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*Matthew 14*

<sup>13</sup> *When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup> When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.*

<sup>15</sup> *As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."*

<sup>16</sup> *Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."*

<sup>17</sup> *"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.*

<sup>18</sup> *"Bring them here to me," he said. <sup>19</sup> And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. <sup>20</sup> They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. <sup>21</sup> The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

It's wonderful to have the opportunity to speak to you this morning. We find ourselves nearing the end of one the hottest summers in memory in which baseball started late and hockey will seemingly never finish; where quarantines are the norm and good people are wearing masks; where the school year may or may not begin in just a few weeks; where ordinary folks are protesting racial injustice, and the government's political response is to send in unasked for and unmarked troops, and where our job situations and market positions are all up in the air because of the global pandemic. Like the commercial says, "Want to get away?" Wait, you can't!

The inability to escape the chaos is familiar to me.

I grew up as part of a large family as one of nine kids. I am the oldest of five, and we had seven foster kids over the years, four from one family during my high school years. For some reason, we didn't go out much... It never occurred to me then what a difficult thing it must be to have the Singer's over, all eleven of us. Home was full, of noise, of love and people, who were always busy, always loud. We had six teenagers and just one bathroom, three of whom were girls during the 80's big hair days, and so for myself

I found school to be the closest thing to alone time that I could get. Did you ever find it tough to get away?

One of the quiet times in the house was Saturday night as we all got ready for Sunday morning. My mom taught Sunday school for years and each Saturday she would prepare her lesson for the next day, and I have this memory, whether from her preparations or from the class itself of a flannelgraph telling of our story for this morning. Those of you who were in Sunday School, do you remember flannelgraphs. Can you remember the cutout of Jesus, with children at his feet, "*Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not.*" I remember Jesus' smile, and for this story I remember the crowds on the flannel, and then the five loaves and two fish and then as the story continued, and I remember the baskets of food.

It's a wonderful tale of God's provision for one of our most basic of needs, for food. But it's more than that. This story we find in Matthew's Gospel, and the one that follows of Jesus walking on water, are not about Jesus' loving provision and Jesus' loving dominion over nature, or at least not just about that. Matthew places these stories together this way intentionally, and not just so they would make great flannelgraphs. There is depth here, and on hot week like this one, the idea of diving in sounds wonderful. Come join me. The power in this story is in the details and how Jesus weaves the Disciples and the crowd into the story. That's the way Jesus is, he always weaves us into the story, it is not just history, it is our story.

This morning I want us to look at how this miracle happened. It is a miracle birthed from and empowered by compassion, and I think as we look at it we will find things that will challenge and encourage us to be compassionate miracle workers ourselves.

Where we pick up the text this morning is just following a horrible event. Herod has murdered John the Baptist and Jesus has just found out. He is trying to be alone and process this. We know from Scripture that going off alone like this was His practice, this time he did it by boat.

When he reached the other side, a crowd had gathered, following him as he went. We aren't told the details, whether they saw Jesus floating by, or the disciples came

through, but however it happened a crowd gathered. When Jesus saw them, even as emotionally spent as he undoubtedly was, grieving as he undoubtedly was, he had compassion on them. He had just experienced a tremendous loss, a great personal injustice. His cousin had just been taken from him maliciously by a political power, and Jesus' response is to reach out with love and compassion.

We live in a world that so often sees things in terms of power. In our past and present political climate a gathering of believers praying for peace and healing on a bridge is a seditious and violent protest necessitating a police response. Jesus refused to function, nor to see the world in those terms. In Matthew Chapter 4 when Jesus is tempted he refuses, not only to take up the power that the Tempter offers, but to even see the world in the way the Tempter does, as one that power is the means ruling and the means to victory.

Jesus wants to empower not with the ability to use force and control, but with the love and compassion and the possibility of standing for others, with them, and alongside them.

So he heals their sick, and speaks to them, and shows with his words and actions that he loves them. As evening approaches, I'm guessing the disciples are spent. They've probably been managing crowd control, and I would guess that they are ready to settle down for the evening, so they very reasonably (at least to their way of thinking) suggest to Jesus to send the crowds to the villages so they can buy themselves some food. They are thinking that their job is done, and they can send the people home, but Jesus will not have it.

You see, the Disciples thought they were coordinating an event, Jesus understood this was that he was building something greater, community. Now the Disciples understood power, especially grasping for it. James and John had their mom come to Jesus asking for prime seats as they rose to power together. But they didn't really understand Jesus at all and his ministry of compassion. It's kind of like the difference between a nine to five job, and that of being a farmer. My father-in-law is a cattle and sugar beet farmer in rural Montana. There is no nine to five, the job never ends. But it moves at a different pace. The deadlines are set organically and atmospherically by Mother nature, and the

pulse and life of a famer follows it. There really aren't weekends off, and no paid vacation or retirement.

Compassion looks like that. It pays little attention to schedules and time frames, and if it is your desire to follow Jesus, we need to be aware that we are always on the clock, but never depleted. Because you and I, just like Jesus, can draw on the strength of the God who has visited us with such compassion. Our compassion doesn't flow just from us, but from the very heart of God. It strengthens us by the power of the Holy Spirit, enabling us come alongside someone else in their time of need.

This miracle of what we call the feeding of the five thousand begins with compassion. It begins with one soul trying to understand the difficulty another is going through and making the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual decision to not judge, compare, or resent, but instead to empathize, to care, to come alongside and love another person. Compassion means quite literally to suffer together.

Jesus entered into the suffering of those he cared for, but His disciples were not quite there yet. The great thing about our Lord is that Jesus never fails to teach us, right. I don't know about you, but I know I have much to learn about what compassion looks like, and what Jesus' says in this text is that compassion means you don't place the job in someone else's lap. Have you ever worked a job with a time clock? Remember how you feel at the end of the day when you punch out. See ya. That's what the Disciples want. They understandably want a break from their job. And that is the problem. What Jesus invites us to is not a job, but a life of compassion. This is not a situation where you can say, "You have one job, compassion." You have one life, how about you live it compassionately. It's more than just taking on a responsibility, it is deciding to live this way. The disciples wanted to send the people away, and Jesus said, "No, this is what discipleship looks like."

In 2017, following a change in our country's immigration policy the church I pastored in Hyannis formed a ministry (under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Linda Shaw and George Wright) whose goal was to reach out with compassion to immigrants in Hyannis offering them fellowship, support, sanctuary if necessary, and connection with legal representation. It involved driving to Boston, teaching English, listening and having

conversations with others, providing childcare, and sometimes providing financial assistance. But mostly it involved compassion. It involved coming alongside them. In three years we helped over seventy families, some to get green cards, some to escape dangerous situations, some to become citizens, and some we walked with as they were deported. Compassion.

Sometimes, in the face of great need, we can be paralyzed. The truth is you can't do everything, but you can do something. What's more, your something matters! You living a life of compassion makes a difference. The Disciples needed to learn that, that taking an intentional and uncomfortable step of compassion matters. It may not be not be huge, it may seem just personally exhausting and insignificant. It may just start with a change of thought, to not judge so harshly that group protesting on TV because you have no idea of the oppression that they have experienced. It may be that you are being called to reach out to your neighbor in trouble, or to stand in the gap for those in need. I don't know. I do know that, in the words of the musical Hamilton, history is watching us. I wonder, will we be those who stood on the sidelines, or those who acted with compassion.

The disciples found five loaves and two fish. Five loaves and two fish. Exactly how hard did they look? Matthew says it was a crowd of 5000 men, so it is possible that with women and children gathered it might have been 15,000 people. Only five loaves and two fish. The Disciples didn't understand yet, they still thought it was a job, and that they had done the minimum requirement. Jesus was patient with them, and Jesus is patient with you and with me. We are all learning.

The truth is, that it is possible than in a crowd of 5000 men, none would have had food. Because we are men, and at times we are that stupid, but what I've got to say is, "How about their wives?" In my household there is a zero percent chance that we would leave for the day without having brought some food or have had some plans for the same. And it is not because it would have been front and center in my brain. It is because my wife would have. In the ancient world, the kitchen and food provision was usually the woman's responsibility, so there may have been 5000 men without food, but do you think there were that many women and children without any food?

One of the truths of small acts of compassion, is that they multiply. Because we live in a world where God is always moving and working. God is not just working in your heart but in every heart. The power of compassion is the possibility of that exponential multiplication. When you and I live out our life of compassion, it will be surprising the miracles we will see along our way.

Understand me, God is the Creator of all that is, the one that with great works freed the people of Israel from their bondage Egypt, and provided Manna for them each morning of their time in the desert. That same God certainly could provide from nothing loaves and fishes to feed five, ten or fifteen thousand people. But I ask you, what is a greater miracle, that God would out of nothing create bread and fish? Or is it a greater miracle that hearts broken by fear, isolation, and self-concern would dare to break out of that state and share with their neighbors? Is it not a truer miracle that compassion for a day would win and that a community would truly taste and see that the Lord is good as we are good to one another? Just something for us to think about.

When Jesus was in the desert he was tempted to turn stones to bread. He refused. That isn't the way power is used. His power is based out of compassion and love. He desired for his Disciples to understand that at the end of the day the miracle was not the baskets of food, but the compassion that the food represented. Don't you see? For you and me today this is so important. We are living in a time when compassion will be always misconstrued and misunderstood. Yet we are the miracle makers of our time and we do this with small acts of compassion.

From five loaves and two fish to twelve baskets. That's the power of a life lived for compassion. For Jesus, the fish and the loaves were an example, revealing to us, that what we have isn't nearly as important as what we are willing to do with it. Sometimes you and I can believe we aren't enough for God to use, but Jesus fed a crowd from a kid's lunchbox. Imagine what Jesus can do with you, empowered by the Holy Spirit and centered on loving and God and your neighbor. Twelve baskets indeed and everyone full!

But the point for Jesus wasn't full bellies, as important as that was, it was for his Disciples and all those gathered to see the power of compassion and begin to have it seep into their hardened hearts, transforming them bit by bit.

And I believe the same thing is happening to you and to me. It's my hope that the compassion that Jesus modeled and believed was present not only in his disciples but in the crowd will move us to do the same in and for others. God loves us so much, understands you and I so perfectly, all our self-deceptions and pettiness, and loves us anyway. There was nothing we could do to earn that love, and there is nothing we can do to lose it. It is that love that fuels us, empowers us to reach out into our world with compassion. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, even in the midst of person despair and trial you placed others before yourself. We are so humbled by your example and long for your Spirit to fill us, empowering us to love that selflessly. Give us eyes to see that next step of compassion we might take. Keep us from being weary in well-doing, and missing opportunities to see miracles that surround us. May we be patient with ourselves, understanding we aren't going to have this figured out overnight, but may we yet move forward steadily by your power. And then may we empower others with our words and actions, and may our world be transformed in our so doing. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen