

TWO KINGDOMS

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Matthew 14:13-21

The story of the feeding of the 5000 is familiar to us all. It should be, we invoke it every time there is a church potluck dinner and it looks like there won't be enough food. (There always is.) Even non-Christians are aware of the time that Jesus fed 5000 people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. It is the only miracle reported by all four of the gospels. We can find this story in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (with a few variations from gospel to gospel). It was truly a miracle.

As we read in this story, Jesus takes a boat out onto the Sea of Galilee and sails up the coast to a deserted place where he might be by himself. But a crowd of people follow him and are there to meet him when he lands. Instead of getting back in the boat and sailing off, Jesus has *compassion* on these people and cures the ones who are sick.

Then, late in the afternoon, Jesus' disciples approach him suggesting that he send the people away. After all, they were in the middle of nowhere and it was getting late, and the people were bound to be hungry. For their own good, they needed to go home or to a nearby village and buy food for themselves. Jesus informs the disciples that it is not necessary to make the people leave. *You give them something to eat*, he tells them. The disciples are shocked to hear this and point out that they have among them only a meager five loaves of bread and two fish—barely enough for the disciples themselves and clearly not enough for this crowd. (They don't want to be hungry themselves.)

Jesus then instructs the disciples to bring the food they have to him. Jesus directs the crowd to take a seat on the grass. Then, taking the food that had been gathered, Jesus looks up to heaven, and blesses and breaks the loaves, and gives them to the disciples who distribute them to the people. The people eat and are filled. There are even leftovers—twelve baskets of leftovers.

The story of the feeding of the 5000 tells of a true miracle. Not only does Jesus heal the sick but he feeds the people as well, allowing them to eat until they can eat no more. Where formerly there was a scarcity of food, Jesus creates an abundance. Where there is need, Jesus demonstrates God's power and God's love.

That is the story as we are familiar with it. But there is a context to this story that is often overlooked. In the feeding of the 5000 Matthew is not just demonstrating God's power to give us our *daily bread*, Matthew is offering a subversive teaching about our reality. He is opening our eyes to a world that is different than the one we see around us.

The context of the story is that it follows directly on the account of the execution of John the Baptist. It is upon hearing this news of the death of John—his cousin and co-worker in ministry—that Jesus heads out on the boat seeking to be alone. As our reading begins, *when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place to be by himself.*

John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. He was the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. As an adult he had become a colorful and controversial figure in Judea. Some said he was a prophet. His message of repentance challenged the religious authorities. He freely spoke out against the political regime as well. The king of Galilee was Herod Antipas. He was the son of Herod the Great, who had been ruler at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod Antipas was not really a king but technically a *tetrarch* because he inherited one-fourth of his father's power. He ruled at the will of the Roman Empire. Eventually, Herod Antipas fell out of favor with the emperor. In the summer of the year 39, his money and territory were taken away and turned over to Agrippa, the brother of his wife Herodias, and Herod was exiled to France.

One of the things that John the Baptist criticized Herod for was Herod's marriage to Herodias, a woman to whom Herod was actually related. According to the book of Leviticus, this marriage was not lawful. Herod, despite being a leader of the Jewish people, blatantly ignored the laws of scripture by marrying Herodias, and John called him out for it. To silence John's embarrassing public accusations, Herod has John arrested and imprisoned. John remains in prison for two years.

As I said, there is a context to the story of the feeding of the 5000, and that context is a birthday party—King Herod's birthday party. At this party, Herod's stepdaughter—the daughter of his wife Herodias—dances for the guests. Herod is so smitten by this performance that he rashly promises the young girl whatever she might want. The girl consults with her mother Herodias—and remember, Herodias is the one who has caught the brunt of John's public accusations about her marriage. This is her opportunity for revenge. She sends her daughter back to Herod with the demand, *Give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter.* Herod does not want to do this but because of the promise made in front of his guests, he capitulates. Herod orders John's execution and the head delivered to the party on a platter as specified. John's disciples take John's body and bury it. They find Jesus and inform him what has happened. Upon hearing this news, Jesus, understandably, gets in the boat and sails off to be alone.

We have two stories here. We have the story of the king's murderous birthday party and we have the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people. What I want you to consider today is what happens when we read these stories together. What do we discover about the kingdom of heaven?

In the first story, at the birthday party, there is sumptuous food and drink, there are prominent guests, there is music and dancing. In the second, there are no

banquet tables piled high with food, no entertainment. Instead, we find a crowd of people, some of them ill, wandering in the wilderness, teeming towards an itinerant preacher who is rumored to do extraordinary things. Those people sit on the grass while the party-guests recline on cushions.

At the party, we find the elites cavorting in debauchery, a king smitten by the gyrations of his stepdaughter, a murderous request rooted in an embarrassing truth, a prophet beheaded because of a silly promise voiced by a powerful fool. In the wilderness, we find healing, a holy man curing the sick.

What we eventually realize is that in these two stories we clearly see two kingdoms—the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of earth is ruled by an earthly ruler, luxuriating in his palace fortress, hobnobbing with the elite, oblivious to the laws of God, carrying out executions for the delight of his party guests.

The kingdom of heaven, on the other hand, is found in the wilderness where people flock toward hope—people who are broken and hungry. In this kingdom, all are fed, not just the elites. In the kingdom of heaven is life in abundance, with leftovers. In this kingdom, God is present.

In the church, we know of God's kingdom, we are aware of its presence around us. We feast at God's table, we've tasted its bread.

The real miracle of this story is not the loaves and fishes. The real miracle is that Jesus has compassion for the people. Matthew has already established that Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us. For a god to stop and have compassion on the “least of these”—the poor, the broken, the forgotten—that is the miracle.

One thing that stands out in this story is the charge given to the disciples. When they ask Jesus to send the people away to get food, Jesus says to them, *You give them something to eat*. They argue that they only have bread and fish—not enough for this crowd. But Jesus shows them how to appeal to heaven, how to multiply the food.

As disciples of Christ, that command extends to us all. “You feed them,” applies to us here today. It is not just food, but anything that people need—water, shelter, clothing, employment, security, medical care—the basics of life. Through these acts, when done with compassion, we can see a new reality; we can see the kingdom of heaven.

We see this kingdom

- when a young person turns down a high-paying job so that they might work with the homeless,

- when a wrongly-condemned prisoner is set free because someone decided to re-examine the evidence,
- when nations set aside their self-interests and choose to work together for the good of the planet,
- when a child is given a net that will protect them from the mosquitoes that carry malaria,
- when refugees are embraced by a community and treated with dignity,
- when a village is given access to safe, clean water.

In all of these moments (and so many more), we are able to catch a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, God's reign on this earth. How do we make these things happen? I'll tell you the same thing that Jesus told his disciples, "You do it."

Amen.