

Miracle Feedings: Not A Path to Power  
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John 6:1-21

My first parish job out of seminary was on the staff of a church near downtown Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Nestled among old trees and historic homes, the church had become a silent brick witness to just how fragile the economic situation really was in that neighborhood. Every weekday at lunchtime, there'd be a line of hungry people waiting on the sidewalk for the soup kitchen to open. These guests included folks who were homeless by choice; some were just down on their luck; and some were the so-called working poor for whom having those five-plus meals made the difference between keeping the electricity on, or not. For their part, the volunteer cooks were experts at producing feasts for an average of 150 people from what appeared to be five loaves and two fish. They didn't have Jesus' extraordinary power to literally multiply God's bounty. They did, however, possess his gift for compassion and being willing to meet human needs with grace, cheerfulness, and gratitude for the opportunity to do it.

We meet Jesus this morning at a similar crossroads, where he and the disciples are faced with a hungry crowd and limited resources to provide for them. The lectionary for the next several weeks has moved us out of Mark's gospel and into John's. In doing so, it's dropped us into what some preachers call "Bread Season." Over the next several weeks, we will be reading together about Jesus, bread, eternal life, and the relationship among the three of them. We will hear echoes of our own confusion about who he is, where to find what he says that God will provide as the bread of life, and possibly some hints about what might be happening when we gather around the altar to share the meal

he told us to. We'll also find out that eating the bread he has to offer is a matter of faith, rather than being something that requires a trip to King Arthur in order to make.

The story of the Feeding of the 5000, which kicks off this Bread Season, is a familiar one. Jesus' teaching has drawn a stadium-sized crowd. He and his disciples somehow have to provide lunch for all of them. However, the only resources they have available are five barley loaves and two fish which they acquired from an unsuspecting boy. All four of the gospel writers describe what happens next: Jesus gives thanks to God, everyone in the crowd gets something to eat, and the disciples are left to pack up baskets of leftovers. John's take on this event does, as you might expect, have its own unique spin, which differs from the other gospels in two key ways: timing, and theological significance.

In terms of timing, this miracle occurs at a critical juncture in Jesus' early ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it in the aftermath of the death of John the Baptizer. They all describe it roughly in terms of Jesus showing compassion, and hospitality, to the crowds who just would not leave him alone. John, on the other hand, ties it to Passover. That event would have brought up both the Exodus itself, as well as God's long-standing provision of "manna in the wilderness" when the Israelites complained they were hungry. If there is some deeper meaning John is trying to communicate here, it's that God will meet human needs when asked, and not always in ways that humans expect God will meet them.

The second key difference among the different versions of the story is John's blatant elevation of the miracle to the status of a "sign" – that is, some miracle occurrence which is meant to demonstrate that Jesus is exactly who he says he is.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't quite treat it that way. They kind of leave it hanging – that is, "Jesus did this, then he went off and did something else like it was no big deal" – which in turn leaves it to the readers to figure it out. In John, it's clear right away that the vast multiplication of the little food available, coupled with the timing, as a sign that Jesus is a prophet. The people don't know what that means, quite, except that it makes them want to make Jesus their literal king. He wants nothing to do with it, so he runs as far away from it as he can possibly get.

It's questionable at best whether the people's understanding of what a king is matches Jesus' own understanding. The Greek word John uses for "king" suggests that the people are trying to set Jesus up as a rival to the Roman emperor, complete with the purple toga and all the trappings of power that went along with it. One also has to wonder if the people's desire to make him a king was because they saw him only as a food source. Because if he could make lunch appear from nothing, maybe, just maybe, he could do something even bigger, like making the Romans disappear.

Jesus' understanding of "kingship" in no way involved displays of raw power. It was more along the lines of "The Son of Man comes not to be served but to serve, but to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45, NRSV). He gives his power away FOR OTHERS, rather than hoarding it for himself – which is not how rulers have tended to behave throughout history. The conclusion we are meant to draw here is that the word *king*, does not imply what the people think it does when it comes to Jesus. More importantly, keeping with John's theological framework of needing to see the signs and come to correct understanding in order to behold God's glory, Jesus knows it is not yet the proper time for that glory to be seen in its fullness. And, as he tells Pilate later: "My

kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (Jn 18:36, NRSV).

The line about Jesus refusing to let the people make him their king struck me when I read it, much more so than the miraculous, exponential multiplication of food did. That's probably because of what is going on in our politics right now – starting with the president's stunning withdrawal from the pursuit of a second term, and ending with the legal and existential debates simmering on the back burner about things like the limits of executive power. I think why it hit me as it did is that so much of what we're talking about is exactly the issue John raises: are leaders there to serve, in a proscribed role for a fixed amount of time? Or is their job to try to grab as much power for themselves as possible?

Service, and clearly demonstrating what it looks like when God shows up to give humans what they need are. ultimately why Jesus both feeds the crowd. They're also why he wants nothing to do with the idea that only a king could accomplish such a feat. His love for them means he will go to no end to provide for their immediate needs, while at the same time trying to get them to learn about what it will take to meet those needs for the long haul. As we continue to move through what has already been a very tumultuous season in our history, let us keep those reasons at the forefront of our interactions, both within these walls and outside of them. The truth is, no matter how our opinions diverge about *how* to go about taking the five loaves and two fish we've been given and turn them into something more, we absolutely need each other in order to do it.