

Matthew 14:13-21  
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### **More Than Nothing**

Ahead of our second lesson for today, Jesus has been busy telling parables, picture stories. He has been trying to re-train the disciples' vision, to help them see the power and beauty of the kingdom breaking in right before their eyes. On the heels of telling these parables, Jesus heads home to Nazareth where he is belittled and written off in his home synagogue—one translation tells us “They were repulsed by him.”<sup>1</sup> Then Matthew shifts the action to Herod's palace for a bit. Having gotten wind of all that this preacher from the sticks is up to, Herod grows anxious. These pesky prophets will not leave him alone. They haunt him and insist on confronting him and telling him “No.” And he is not one who likes to be told “no.” The last straw is when John the Baptist insists that Herod's brother's wife is not simply Herod's for the taking. Herod imprisons John and then throws himself a birthday banquet. His boasting gets the best of him, and he winds up having John killed for the sake of saving his own pride. John's disciples bury him and share the grim news with Jesus. [Read Matthew 14:13-21]

Nothing. Jesus' disciples insist they have nothing. John has been killed for confronting a corrupt dictator. The crowds keep coming. And the disciples are scraping the bottom of the barrel. Jesus, too, is in search of a moment, just a moment to grieve, to rest. The disciples grow anxious. It is late. Everyone is far from home. Everyone is hungry. It is time to call it a night.

This is the one story that all four gospels share. All four gospels emphasize this moment as central to who this Jesus is and what he comes to do. The disciples are still learning to see

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:57, Common English Bible

with new eyes, and it is hard. Scarcity and anxiety are the name of the larger world's game. Jesus has commissioned them to cast out demons and heal the sick. They have seen him do these very things with their own eyes. They have been able to do them too in his name. And still that mantra of "not enough, not enough, not enough," is very hard to un-learn and un-learn. Those empty pockets and growling bellies and grieving hearts are hard to argue with, especially with a ruthless and ravenous empire breathing down their necks. "We've got nothing," they tell him.

Technically, it is not true. They have five loaves and two fish, but that would not even be enough to make a snack for Jesus and the twelve. They rightly insist that this is not enough to feed the thousands who have flocked to the hillside. *It's not enough, Jesus.* My hunch is that the disciples' concerns are about more than food; my hunch is that the honeymoon is wearing off. I imagine the disciples are wondering if all that Jesus preaches and promises is really enough and if they are up to the task of following where he leads. Is it enough...are they enough...is he enough?

Maybe the question we ask depends on where we are sitting. Are we sitting among those in the crowds who have followed Jesus from town to town just to be near him, just to hear the words of hope he offers? Or are we among the disciples, the weary ones who now know that John, the one who proclaimed Jesus' kingdom, the one who like Jesus dared to speak truth to power has paid the ultimate price for his passion. I'm inclined to chime in with the disciples: "Um, Jesus, we're worn out and we're anxious. How exactly do you expect us to feed all these people with two measly fish and a couple of handfuls of rolls? That's not even enough for us; how can we possibly feed thousands with what amounts to a meager snack for 13 grown

men?" Jesus must be worn out and worn down by his hometown's rejection, the death of the one who baptized him and proclaimed his coming, and the endless stream of people in need. I wouldn't blame Jesus for shaking his head, benching this team, and recruiting some new disciples with fresh legs and fresh hearts from the thousands sitting on the grass. But he doesn't. Instead, he takes the nothing they offer. And with echoes of the meal that he will share with his disciples in that Upper Room and the meal he offers us at this table, he blesses their pitiful offering and breaks the loaves apart and hands them to the disciples. They in turn share the food with the crowds and then gather the leftovers, the ridiculously abundant leftovers.

From all we can tell, the crowds do not know a miracle has occurred. They just know that they have been fed, that they have eaten their fill without the worry that they left their wallets at home or that their bank account is overdrawn. They have eaten their fill without having to prove that they are hungry or worthy. Matthew tells us that Jesus immediately ushers the disciples away, but I can't help but wondering about the crowds. I like to imagine that they linger underneath the stars. I like to think that they make their way down the mountain filled with good things, given strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, as the hymn sings. I like to picture their marveling at the picnic they just shared, a free and abundant feast that stands in stark contrast to the oppressive empire that insists on our earning our keep, paying our dues, and justifying our very existence.

But what are the disciples thinking? Jesus will soon send them off in a boat. In their boarding the boat and heading out to sea, do they find a way to marvel, too? Do they pause even for a second to offer a prayer of gratitude for the feast they have just witnessed? I hope so, because lest we—or they—forget, the disciples have been fed, too. Yes, they are

participants in the blessed miracle Jesus performs, and they are fed, too, more than a paltry snack found at the bottom of someone's backpack. They are fed, too, which is good, because too often we who serve, we who want to feed the masses and save the world can forget that Jesus intends to feed us, to nurture us, to save us, too.

I'm sure you have seen those flyers on bulletin boards at coffee shops or libraries with small tickets that can be torn off. The tickets usually have a phone number, a web site, or an email address directing people toward job training or counseling or grief support, among other things. Sadly unless the one posting the flyers tears off at least one ticket, the likelihood is that no one else will. Even when no one is watching, we are not enthusiastic about admitting that we might be in need in some way, and yet, we are all in need. Yes, we in this sanctuary are for the most part infinitely more privileged than the majority of the world. We may not wonder where we will sleep tonight or where our next meal will come from, but we are all in need of saving. As you have heard me say countless times before, we cannot save ourselves, and the great good news is that we do not have to. Yes, Jesus expects us to feed the hungry, to speak out against injustice, to share what we have, and he makes it clear that he comes to feed us, too, because he knows we need to be fed. And that is exactly what he does, if we let him.

This morning we are praying for students, teachers, bus drivers, administrators, families, custodians, coaches, tutors, and crossing guards—everyone whose summer schedules will shift into a different gear over the next two weeks. Amidst the excitement of new paper clips, pencils, lunch boxes, calculators, and backpacks, there is—I'm guessing—a fair amount of worry, too. Teachers worry about having enough notebooks and enough patience. Parents worry about whether their children will have enough support and if their precious ones will be

safe enough. Students worry about being smart enough or having enough friends. These worries are part of a larger anxiety-ridden, scarcity-preaching culture. There are so many loud voices that shout about scarcity, voices that tell us that there will never be enough, that we will never be enough. Those voices can be powerfully convincing, and yet, they are not preaching the gospel.

We have shared backpack tags and stickers, reminders that “God has your back” and my back and their back, too, whoever they may be. We celebrate every student’s achievements, and yet we know that without the supporting cast around them, around us, we cannot begin to learn to tie our shoes, find the restroom, learn Spanish, or unlock our lockers. The message of this pop-up feast on the hillside and the beloved 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is that there is enough, that God promises to provide enough and that we are not sent out to fly solo and fend for ourselves. With all the shouting over what our children should and should not be taught in school, I wonder what we the church are teaching them and what we are learning ourselves. If our children and we learn nothing else this year, may we somehow by the grace of God find a way to learn and believe and trust that God’s faithful promise of abundant grace in Jesus Christ trumps the heresy of scarcity. Always. Period. That is the truth. That is the good news.

No matter who you are, no matter how empty you may be, no matter how anxious or excited you may feel, no matter how much you have stuffed in your lunch box or how little you can scrounge from the bottom of your pocket, Jesus Christ meets you here, meets us here and invites us to rest for a moment and enjoy this feast. We are invited not because we have earned it, not because we have said the right words or believed the correct things. No, we are invited because God knows just how hungry we are. And the great good news is this: in the

midst of death valley and lush hillsides and every place in between, there is enough food, enough love, enough grace, more than enough in fact to go around. So before we head back down the mountain, before we head back out into God's anxious, scarcity-fixated, and beloved world, let us savor this meal offered freely by the One who is and always will be enough for us and for all.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.