

Sunday, August 2, 2026
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13A)
Matthew 14.13-21
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Feeding of the Five Thousand Plus”

Hopefully, we all know that the Bible contains four Gospels. Each written by a different author. Each written to a different audience. As a result, while each Gospel contains substantially the same story of the life and ministry, the death and resurrection, of Jesus Christ; while each contains many of the same basic stories about Jesus, each nonetheless contains and focuses on slightly different details. All that said, today’s miracle, commonly referred to as the “Feeding of the Five Thousand,” is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. Which says something about the importance of this single miracle.

The version we have today is in Matthew’s Gospel. In his Gospel, Matthew is writing primarily to a Jewish audience, essentially making the case that Jesus is the new Moses sent to liberate God’s people. With that as a lens, what does the feeding of the five thousand, as Matthew reports it, have to say to the crowd that was Jesus’ original audience? What does I have to say to the Jewish audience Matthew was writing to—Jews who were recent converts to Christianity or who were considering converting? And what does it have to say to the Church that eventually came into being, both the early Church and the Church we have inherited?

First off, the reporting of the miracle itself is pretty basic. Jesus has spent the day preaching, teaching, and healing a crowd of five thousand men plus women and children. Sounds like Jesus is pretty wrapped up in what he was doing and lost track of time. The disciples go to Jesus and urge him to send the crowd away so they can get something to eat. Jesus has other plans. Let the disciples feed the crowd. But how? All they have is a mere five loaves of bread and two fish. Hardly enough to feed Jesus and his disciples, let alone more than five thousand others. After blessing the meager rations, all are miraculously fed, with plenty left over. That’s it. No explanation of exactly how the loaves and fish were multiplied. There are various thoughts as to how this actually happened, but to my way of thinking, those details really do not matter. The thing that truly matters is that everyone was fed.

But is that it? The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand plus would have had so much more to say to both Jesus’ original audience—to the crowd that Jesus fed that day—and to Matthew’s Jewish audience. The whole experience would have brought to mind some significant images from their collective history. Images that, in turn, would have told these Jewish audiences something of who Jesus was and what he had to offer, beyond just a free meal.

Matthew’s Gospel account twice notes that this feeding miracle occurred in “a deserted place.” For those in the crowd that day, as well as Matthew’s audience hearing of this miracle some fifty years after the fact, this miracle occurring in “a deserted place” would have been significant. It would have immediately called to mind the history of their people, when over a thousand years before, Moses had led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, through the

wilderness—through deserted places—to liberation in the Promised Land. Deserted, wilderness places being connected in Hebrew thought to wandering and uncertainty. The wandering in the wilderness for forty years, uncertain what would happen to them, uncertain when the journey would end, when they would reach their new home. Raising questions of identity. Who are we now, if not slaves in Egypt? Who are we now without a land of our own? Questions they could certainly relate to not just from a historical perspective, but even in their current circumstances as a vassal state of the Roman Empire. Raising questions of security and sustenance. As they wandered in the wilderness, who would take care of them throughout the journey to their new home? Questions that even in their present day were relevant, particularly for so many who were poor and on the margins of society.

Many of those questions, ancient and contemporary to those living in the first century, being answered in a sacramental act of being given bread to eat. In the wilderness, many centuries before, their ancestors had been given manna—bread from heaven. Not just food. Not just a means of sustenance. But an ongoing sign—manna delivered every day for forty years (except on the Sabbath). A sign of their identity, that they were God's people. An assurance of security and sustenance that God would care for them throughout their journey. That God would lead them to their new home: a place that would reshape their identity, that would provide for their security, that would solidify their liberation.

And now, here, in this deserted place, with all these images swirling in their minds, recalling their collective history, Jesus answers the contemporary equivalent questions of identity, of security and sustenance, in a similar way. By providing bread. Sending a powerful message to the gathered crowd that he would be the one to provide them with a new identity. He would be the one to lead them to a new home. He would be the one to provide for their security and sustenance on this new journey of liberation. The bread taken, blessed, broken, and given being an outward sign of what he would provide for them in that deserted, wilderness place, as well as moving forward in the uncertainty of the wilderness places of their lives.

The Jewish converts to whom Matthew is writing, and those who may have been considering such a radical move, would have likewise seen this historical and sacramental meaning in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand plus. It would have provided the insight, the confirmation, they needed as they discerned whether to become Christian.

For the early Church, developing in the decades following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the images and meanings embedded in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand plus would have taken on additional significance. To the Jewish converts to Christianity, as well as to Gentile converts, the wilderness imagery presented would have certainly been a reminder of their Jewish roots and of the foundation of their faith. In addition, informed by the whole story of Jesus' life and ministry—which the original audience would not have knowledge of—the deserted place in which this miracle occurs would have also brought to mind another deserted place. The deserted, wilderness place in which Jesus found himself after being baptized and before beginning his public ministry. The location of the forty-day experience in which Jesus was tempted and tested by the devil. A time of formation in which Jesus came to fully realize who he is and what that means for his life moving forward. A time that would shape his public

ministry of teaching and preaching, of healing, of feeding. The public ministry that would ultimately lead to his Passion, to his death, and to his resurrection.

With the benefit of the full story of the Gospels and what happened in Jesus' life after that particular event, the feeding of the five thousand plus would have taken on additional meaning for the early Christians. The feeding of the five thousand plus, in a way, foreshadowing another significant event in Jesus' life and identity, as well as to the identity of the Church. All centered on the seemingly simple actions Jesus performed in that deserted place. "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds."

To the early Church, Jesus' actions would have called to mind the Last Supper. As Matthew records that event: "While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'" (Mt 26.26-29). The final meal he shared with his disciples. The institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist, of Holy Communion. One of the two sacraments central to our faith. Eucharist, along with Baptism being foundational to our life of faith. Sacraments that shape and signify our identity and our relationship with Christ. Both these, particularly the Eucharist, foreshadowing another feeding: that of the heavenly banquet in which we will all share in the fullness of time.

There is one other image in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand plus that is also foundational to who we are as members of the Body of Christ. Notice that in the miracle, it is not Jesus who feeds the crowd. Yes, he has a part to play—a critical part. But strictly speaking, he does not feed them. The disciples come to Jesus saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." To which Jesus responds, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." YOU give them something to eat. Jesus then does his part. He prays. He asks for God's presence in the work of feeding. But the responsibility is entrusted to the disciples. Thereby becoming the model for compassionate ministry. The model of engaging in works of service that are first and foremost rooted in prayer. The model for how to live the Gospel.

This one story, a "simple" feeding of a crowd, is about so much more than just providing a meal. It is about providing compassionate care. It is about reminding us of where we come from. It is about liberation. It is about affirming identity. It is about pointing to our true home. And it is about modeling a way of life.

The account of the miracle ends with the words: "And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides woman and children." Five thousand plus. That "plus" being significant, as it is not just reference to the woman and children present at that miraculous event. That "plus" also includes Matthew's Jewish audience who read these words fifty or more years after the fact and saw themselves included in that event; experienced themselves as being spiritually fed, as were their forefathers and foremothers in the faith. That "plus" also includes all those who

through the ages, have, through the image of the feeding of that original crowd recognized that they too are included in that great feast. That “plus” including each of us. Invited to an unlikely feast. A feast that recalls our history as a people, that assures our liberation, that affirms our identity, that leads and sustains us, that continues to feed us in our ongoing journey of faith and service, even as we navigate the wilderness places of our own lives.