

Mark 6:30–44 (NIV)

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.

³¹Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

³²So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

³⁵By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late.

³⁶Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

³⁷But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take more than half a year’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

³⁸“How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

³⁹Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.

⁴⁰So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. ⁴¹Taking the five loaves and the two fish

and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all.

⁴²They all ate and were satisfied, ⁴³and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. ⁴⁴The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

*Jesus does some very spectacular stuff. But what is his disciples’ part in this?
And our own?*

Another miracle story. To be honest, I have a bit of problem with the notion of “miracles.” We use the word to convey an event in which God does something that seems impossible, something completely outside our understanding. I suppose that is ok so far as it goes. Like in today’s story – a few loaves and fishes and in minutes you’re feeding thousands. Yes . . . that is a miracle, lying far outside my understanding of what can happen in this world.



The Loaves and Fish

The stunning St. Andrew Rose Window is filled with symbols of our faith and our Lord.

The symbol of the loaves and fishes serves to remind us of Jesus’ power and that he is the “bread of life.” It also reminds us that each day God provides for our most basic needs. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer we ask God for our daily bread. But, perhaps most importantly, this symbol reminds us of our own responsibility to do all we can to multiply the people of God. We are to be the light to the world so that others may see our good works and give glory to God (Matt 5:16).

At St. Andrew, we begin our multiplication by inviting people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another. We call the Christianish to become passion servants of Jesus. We extend our multiplication through mission projects like Seven Loaves and Four Corners. We strive to carry a loving witness into the communities in which we live and work.

But there are at least two problems. First, it is a short step to believing that miracles such as these are the only way God acts in this world, that God is not really involved in all the day-to-day muck that constitutes the bulk of our lives. Second, God is often reduced to a “God of the gaps” – a way of accounting for what we can’t understand. And as we understand more and more, the gap gets smaller and smaller. The truth is that much of what happens around us each day would be a miracle to everyone in the first-century.

Two Banquets

A key to reading the Bible well is to always look for the context. Put the verse in the paragraph, the paragraph in the immediate story, and then put the story in the context of the stories around it. For example, Mark puts two banquet stories side-by-side: Herod’s banquet (Mark 6:14-29) and the feeding of the thousands (6:30-44). Herod’s banquet ends in death; Jesus’ banquet ends in abundance.

John the Baptist was Jesus’ cousin. Herod had arrested John and thrown him in prison to shut him up, for John had condemned Herod’s incestuous relationship with Herodias, his niece and his brother’s wife. (What a family tree that must have been!)

Herod wants John dead but fears the consequences of an execution. He knows that John the Baptist enjoys popular support. However, on Herod’s birthday, there is a huge banquet. Herodias’ daughter dances for the king and Herod is so taken with her (yes, we are supposed to grasp the decadence in all this!) that he grants her a wish, any wish. The girl asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter . . . and Herod delivers. After Jesus’ disciples claim John’s body and bury it, Jesus withdraws to a boat to be alone.

By putting these stories side-by-side, Mark draws a stark contrast between the rotten empire of Caesar and the life-giving empire of Christ. Caesar and all his minions, like Herod, may believe and proclaim that Caesar is Lord, but it is a lie. There is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, and only one kingdom, God’s. Caesar may have the power to kill John the Baptist, but it is a power that destroys, not creates. Jesus, the true Lord and Savior, has the power to create where there is nothing, to offer abundance where there is emptiness. In Caesar, lies death.

The truth about God is that he is deeply involved in our world and in our lives, not just in those spectacular moments. Indeed, most of the time God seems to work through us, not despite us.

So, with all that said, let’s come to this story and see what we can learn about how God works in this world.

The basics

The basics of the story are simple, easy to visualize, and absolutely astonishing. A huge and hungry crowd is gathered on the Galilean hillside. Having only five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus blesses and miraculously multiplies the food so it is sufficient to feed perhaps 20,000 people with food left over! (Note – though the story is often referred to as the “feeding of the five thousand,” the figure refers only to the men in the crowd, so 20,000 is a reasonable estimate.)

Of all the miracles recounted in the gospels, this is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. In fact, there are two more accounts of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands. As we’d expect, each gospel writer tells the story a little differently. John tells us that a boy brought forward the few loaves and fishes. More than the others, John’s telling of the meal evokes memories of the Exodus and of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. Matthew brings out Jesus healing and compassion. More explicitly than the others, Luke ties together the disciples’ mission to build the kingdom and the power of Jesus’ work with the crowds. This is how it is with the gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John may all work with the same material, but each uses it to paint a distinctive portrait of Jesus.

Mark’s story

After John the Baptist is beheaded by Herod, the crowds press Jesus and his disciples ever harder. There are so many of them, so much need. It becomes such a crush that Jesus and the disciples leave and head for a solitary place. But, of course, the crowds find them again. When Jesus sees the large throng, he

has compassion for them. As he puts it, they are like sheep without a shepherd. And without a shepherd, sheep are lost, unable to find even their own food and water . . . so Jesus sits down and begins to teach.

What's up with the sheep?

Sheep and their shepherds play an important role in the Bible, but few of us have much experience with either. The following is adapted from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, which is a very helpful resource.

“Conditions of shepherding in ancient Palestine provide the foundation for figurative references. These conditions were very different from most modern practices. Sheep were not fenced in and left to fend for themselves. Instead they were totally dependent on shepherds for protection, grazing, watering, shelter and tending to injuries. In fact, sheep would not survive long without a shepherd. Sheep are not only dependent creatures; they are also singularly unintelligent, prone to wandering and unable to find their way to a sheepfold even when it is within sight.”

Late in the day, the disciples come to Jesus, pointing out that they are out in the middle of nowhere and it is time for everyone to head off and find something to eat in the nearby villages. But Jesus says no; everyone can stay. The disciples are to give everyone something to eat. I imagine they looked at one another in exasperation, wondering just how they were to accomplish such a task. It would be impossible. Just paying for the food would take more than six months' wages. Are they really supposed to take such a vast sum in order to make one meal for these people?

Jesus then asks them to look around and see how much they really have. Only five loaves of bread and two fish can be found. Nonetheless, Jesus tells the disciples to have everyone sit down in groups of fifty or a hundred.

Jesus looks to heaven, blesses the food, hands it to his disciples . . . and Jesus is not referred to again in this story. Perhaps the significance of this miracle story lies here.

It is Jesus who takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and multiplies it . . . but it is the disciples who actually distribute the food, feed the crowds, and collect the leftovers. Jesus is the power behind the feeding, but the disciples are the ones who do the work. Jesus doesn't wave a magic wand over the crowd so that food might appear in everyone's lap or so that the hungry tummies will be magically full. This is why the miraculous feeding is in all four gospels . . . the entire miracle story is a metaphor for how Jesus will work. Others will do Jesus' work, during his ministry and after his death. Jesus is teaching his disciples what his ministry is all about. He doesn't just tell them, he shows them. The work of building God's kingdom will be done through the disciples, then and now.

Sharing the miracle

From God's choosing of Abraham to the feeding of the thousands to the work of our food pantry or the new clinic in Costa Rica or the opening of The Well, it has always been this way. God is not a god-of-the-magic-wand. God's purposes are worked out through us, not despite us. Jesus reminds his disciples that they are to be the light of the world. He sends them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Mark 6:6b-13). He shows his disciples how this works by handing them the loaves and having them distribute the food. If the crowds are going to get fed, the disciples are going to have to do it. They can't sit around hoping and praying that Jesus will do it for them. The disciples know whose power is at work, but they are also learning that their own hands better get busy.

Why is it this way? Why doesn't God simply wave a wand? Because God is love and we have been created so that we might love God and one another. This love is not mere sentiment or feeling, this love is manifested in our compassion, our caring, our service, and our sacrifice. Such are the demands of love.

Reflections from N. T. Wright on the Miraculous Feeding

(from Wright's commentary, *Mark for Everyone*)

Perhaps the most obvious question that presses upon us today as we read this story is: it was all very well for the five thousand, but what about us today? Wasn't it a bit odd for Jesus to feed them (they could after all have gone and bought food) but not to feed the millions in our own world who wait with big, round eyes, and big, round stomachs at food distribution centres (if they're lucky), making guest appearances on our television screens and charity posters, and in our consciences? What about them? If God could do it then, why doesn't he do it now?

One obvious answer is what Jesus said to the disciples: you give them something to eat. But the question deserves more than that. It comes out of an assumption which itself needs challenging. What we call Jesus' 'miracles' were not done as acts of supernatural power, in order to show that there was a God who had such power, who was operating through Jesus, and who could (if he chose) solve all problems with a snap of the conjurer's fingers. The mighty acts of Jesus were not that sort of thing at all. They were about the breaking in of God's kingdom in and through Jesus, a complex event which would reach its full climax in his death and resurrection. From that point there would go out into all the world the power of new creation; but it would always have to struggle against the still-resistant forces of evil.

If, then, we repeat Jesus' command ('You give them something to eat') that doesn't just mean 'work a bit harder at famine relief,' though that would certainly help. It will also mean that those who discover the living God in and through Jesus must be prepared to face up to the evil structures and powers that still dominate and control so much of God's world, and to challenge them in the name of Jesus and with the power of his victory on the cross. It isn't just a matter of 'he did supernatural things, so why shouldn't we?' It's a matter of the full achievement of Jesus, of which these strange acts were just a part and a signpost, being brought to bear, through prayer and faithful action, on the world that still waits for the kingdom.

William Wilberforce did it with slavery (it took him an entire lifetime, too); who will do it with world poverty and starvation?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. This is another of the miracle stories in Mark. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), these stories are not signs to Jesus' identity, as they are in John. Instead, they are enactments of the kingdom of God which was breaking in on them all. For example, in the kingdom of God, no one goes hungry – so Jesus provides for thousands on a hillside.
 - a. Do you ever see the kingdom of God bursting forth around you? What does it look like?
 - b. What do you think it would be like to live in the kingdom of God?
2. The study touches on a few problems that the notion of "miracles" can create.
 - a. How can we guard against expecting to encounter God only in the miraculous, i.e., what we can't understand?
 - b. You might spend a few minutes talking about this "god of the gaps," wherein there is room for God only in what we can't explain through science and natural causes. Where do you see this perspective in American culture and education? In our churches?
3. The disciples are the ones who do all the actual organizing, feeding, distributing, and cleaning up in the story.
 - a. What does this say to us about our work in the kingdom of God?
 - b. In what concrete ways are each of us building for the kingdom of God? There's a word of challenge in this and it is something on which we probably need to push ourselves.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Mark 6:1-29 Jesus sends out the twelve; John the Baptist is beheaded</p>	<p>Tuesday, Mark 6:45-56 Jesus walks on water</p>
<p>Wednesday, Mark 7:1-23 What really defiles us?</p>	<p>Thursday, Mark 7:24-37 Jesus honors a Syrophenician woman; he heals a man who is both mute and deaf</p>
<p>Friday, Mark 8:1-21 Jesus feeds a second multitude, warning his disciples about the Pharisees.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Philemon (Feb 4 & 11)

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current Series: *Glittering Vices: the seven deadly sins*

Feb 3 – Avarice: I want it all

Feb 10 – Gluttony: Feeding Your Face, Starving Your Heart

Beginning Monday, February 18:

Another all-church Bible Study in Wesley Hall taught by Scott Engle

A three-week series on Monday evenings at 7pm

What Christians Believe

There will even be "can't-miss" music to start our evening!

The series will be suitable for youth and adults.

Childcare available – make reservations at www.standrewumc.org

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
