

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 8, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS'
DINNER FOR FIVE THOUSAND
Matthew 14:13-21**

Did you know that this story, usually called “The Feeding of the Five Thousand,” is the only miracle recorded in all four of the New Testament Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? That is not quite true. There is one other miraculous event recounted in all four of the Gospels: the resurrection of Jesus. No other miracles are included in all four Gospels. All by itself, that tells us that there is something extremely important here that beckons us to pay close attention.

The four accounts of this miracle are not identical. Each of the Gospel writers tells the story from a different angle, from their own perspectives. But they all describe the same event, which cannot be understood as anything but a miracle. As two of Jesus’ twelve disciples, Matthew and John were eyewitnesses. They were there. They were present when it happened. They saw it with their own eyes. Mark, not one of the Twelve, probably just a teenager at the time, may have been present in the crowd. Regardless, one of the primary sources – probably *the* primary source – for his Gospel was Peter, who was not just one of the Twelve, but the de facto leader of the Twelve. He was there, too. As for Luke, we know that in addition to being a medical doctor, he was a meticulous historian who checked his sources’ recollections carefully to make sure his account was accurate.

All four of the Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; and John 6:1-15) tell the story. After the disciples of Jesus return from their first short-term mission trip, and after hearing about the beheading death of His cousin John the Baptist on orders from Herod Antipas, the “king” (governor) of Judea, Jesus decides it is time to get away from the crowds for a few days of R & R with the disciples. They go out by boat to a “solitary place.” Luke says it is in the vicinity of Bethsaida, a town on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee (Luke 9:10). It would have been an ideal place for Jesus and the Twelve to get some rest and to get their spiritual batteries recharged, except for the massive crowd of people who find out where they are going, walk around the north end of the lake, and actually get there ahead of Jesus and the Twelve. When Jesus and the Twelve reach land, this huge crowd is there waiting for them.

It would be understandable if Jesus had been really annoyed. His plans to get away from the crowds and their needs had been thwarted. He could have resented this intrusion. That’s how many of us – maybe all of us – would have reacted. But not Jesus. Instead, as Luke says, “Jesus graciously welcomed them and talked to them about the kingdom of God. Those who needed healing, He healed” (Luke 9:11, MSG). He taught them. He healed them. Then He fed them, too.

Seeing the crowd, Matthew says that Jesus “had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14). Mark says: “He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34).

SHEEP MINUS A SHEPHERD EQUALS TROUBLE

Everybody who knows anything about sheep knows that:

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{Sheep} \\ \text{-- (minus) a Shepherd} \\ \text{= (equals) Trouble for the Sheep} \end{array}$$

It’s a mathematical equation. Sort of.

The result is Trouble with a capital “T.” Sheep can’t take care of themselves. They can’t protect themselves. Without a shepherd, sheep are in danger of wandering off and getting lost, starving, being stolen, or being attacked, injured or even killed by a predator. Which is true for all of us, spiritually. Being compared to sheep is not flattering. It is not a compliment. But it is accurate. We are like sheep who need a shepherd to protect us, guide us, and provide for us.

The Shepherd we need is Jesus. He is the Shepherd you need and the Shepherd I need. He is, in His own words, “The Good Shepherd” who “lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11), the Shepherd of whom David speaks in Psalm 23:

He makes (us) lie down in green pastures,
He leads (us) beside quiet waters, He restores (our) soul(s).
He leads (us) in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.
Even when (we) walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
(we) need fear no evil, for You are with (us).
(Psalm 23:2-4)

He *is* with us. Our Shepherd is with us, watching over us, because He cares for us. His promised presence gives us comfort and security.

As it says in Isaiah 53, all of us, like sheep, have gone astray. All of us have wandered off and gone our own way. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is with us and for us. And – amazingly – He is not only our shepherd but our sacrifice as well. For “the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity” – the sin and rebelliousness – “of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

THE CIA OF JESUS

We talked last Sunday about the compassion of Jesus. We saw His CIA: His Compassion in Action. It is one of the defining attributes of His life. And it is front and center in this miracle. In *The Message*, it says that when Jesus saw the crowd waiting for Him, “He was overcome with pity and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14, MSG). Mark, in *The*

Message, says that when Jesus arrived and saw the huge crowd, “His heart broke” for them (Mark 6:34, MSG).

Pity and Self-Pity

In one of his books (*Earth and Altar*), Eugene Peterson explains the difference between pity and self-pity. “Pity,” he says, “is one of the noblest emotions available to human beings; self-pity is possibly the most ignoble. Pity is the capacity to enter into the pain of another in order to do something about it; self-pity is an incapacity, a crippling emotional disease that severely distorts our perception of reality. Pity discovers the need in others for love and healing and then fashions speech and action that bring strength; self-pity reduces the world to a personal wound that is displayed as proof of significance. Pity is adrenaline for acts of mercy; self-pity is a narcotic that leaves its addicts wasted and derelict.”

These are strong words. And a warning against the danger of self-pity. Personally, I prefer the word “compassion” to “pity.” The words are analogous if not synonymous. *Compassion* is one of the noblest qualities we can ever cultivate. It is the capacity to enter into the hurt or pain or need of another in order to do something about it. It discovers the need in others and does what it can to meet that need. It is, as Peterson says, adrenaline for acts of mercy.

This is what compassion is. This is what compassion does. And, as we have observed in our *Travels with Jesus*, this is what we see in Jesus. Jesus was not content to feel deeply for people in the particulars of their circumstances. He was moved to act in mercy and grace.

A “Yes” FACE AND A “Yes” HEART

Ethan Magness, an Anglican pastor in (of all places) Grove City, PA, tells this story about Thomas Jefferson. When he was President, Jefferson and some companions were traveling on horseback when they came to a flooded river that had washed a bridge away. Each rider, including the President, was forced to ford the river on horseback, while dealing with a powerful current.

Watching from a distance was a man on foot, not part of Jefferson’s group. After seeing several riders cross the river safely, this stranger wandered up to the President, tapped his boot, and asked: “Can I have a ride across the river?”

Jefferson agreed without hesitation. The man climbed onto Jefferson’s horse and the two of them made it safely to the other side.

As the stranger slid off the back of the horse onto dry ground, one member of Jefferson’s group looked at him with incredulity and said: “Why on earth would you ask the President of the United States for a ride across the river? Why didn’t you ask one of us?”

The man was shocked. “I had no idea he was the President of the United States. All I knew is that written on some of your faces was the word ‘No,’ but written on his face was the word ‘Yes’ – and I needed a ‘Yes’ face today.” (Ethan Magness, Grace Anglican Online, 9-2-19, accessed at PreachingToday.com).

Jesus had a “Yes” face. I’m absolutely sure of it. Jesus had a “Yes” heart. Jesus *has* a “Yes” heart. You can see it – you can’t miss it – in the way He responds to this crowd. One of the reasons people were drawn to Him is because of His “Yes” face. Because of His “Yes” heart. It is the same reason people are still drawn to Him today.

The same Jesus who has said “Yes” to you and me wants us and all of His followers in this world to have a “Yes” face and a “Yes” heart, too. I love saying “Yes” to people. I love saying “Yes” to my wife. I love saying “Yes” to my kids and grandkids. I don’t like saying “No.” Sometimes it is necessary to say “No.” Sometimes it is dangerous, unwise, or downright wrong to say “Yes.” But I don’t ever want to say “No” when God wants me to say “Yes.” And I don’t want to say “Yes” when God tells me to say “No.”

I know this: God wants my heart – and yours – to be like His. Remember what Paul says in Philippians 2:5? “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” What Paul has in mind there is specifically the humility and love of Jesus, seen in His willingness to set aside all the glories of heaven to come and live among ornery creatures like us in order to suffer and die a horrible death. All for us. In the humility and love of Jesus, we also see His compassion for sinners like us. Compassion in Action. CIA. Which is what Jesus wants us to have and do. Not just an attitude of compassion but acts of compassion. *Just. Like. Jesus.*

May the Lord Jesus give to each of us and all of us a “Yes” face and a “Yes” heart to reach out to others with His love and compassion.

ANATOMY OF A MIRACLE

In the Gospel accounts of the miraculous provision of this meal for a crowd of 5,000-plus, the disciples of Jesus were rightly concerned about the lack of food in that “remote place,” as they called it (Matthew 14:15). By the way, Matthew notes that the crowd was “about five thousand men, plus women and children” (14:21). We don’t know how many women and children there were. I’m guessing there were a lot. It wasn’t just men who were attracted to Jesus. Probably husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, children, whole families, along with some who came by themselves, were in the crowd. Which means it may have been ten thousand, or twelve, or more.

They were way out in the boonies (sort of like where I grew up), and if Jesus didn’t send the crowd on their way to get food in the surrounding villages, they were all going to go hungry. So, give the disciples credit for their concern.

But they radically underestimated their resources. They wanted Jesus to send the people away. But what did Jesus say? “There is no need for them to go away. You give them something to eat” (14:16).

The disciples were incredulous. “How in the world are we going to do that? It would cost a fortune to feed a crowd like this.” They did a quick inventory and told Jesus “Look, all we have are five loaves of barley bread” (which were probably the size of dinner rolls) “and two small fish” that a young boy had brought with him (John 6:7-8).

Jesus said: “Bring them here.” You know the rest of the story. He had the people sit down on the grass. He took the barley loaves and the fish, lifted His face to heaven, blessed, broke, and gave it to the disciples who in turn gave the food to everyone in the crowd. They all ate as much as they wanted. And the disciples filled 12 baskets with the leftovers (Adapted from *The Message*.)

Some people have tried to explain away the miraculous nature of this story and spiritualize it by saying the real miracle was that the people in the crowd shared the food they had brought with others, so that everyone got something to eat. It was a miracle of sharing. But that is not what the Gospel writers say happened that day.

Some people say the miracle described by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is just impossible. One Bible commentator (Ulrich Luz) says: “We must give up all attempts for a historical kernel of something that once happened here, if one doesn’t simply want to assert oneself against all verifiable experience” (Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 397; quoted in Douglas S. O’Connell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 406). I’m sure he is not alone. He is saying that it could not have possibly happened because we have never seen or experienced anything like this – as Douglas O’Connell writes, “one loaf turning into thousands of loaves ... one fish, two fish, new fish, true fish! We haven’t seen it, so how can we believe it? It goes against – like the resurrection – verifiable experience” (O’Connell, 406). But, as the Gospel writers attest, as O’Connell and I and the Church throughout its history affirm, this really did happen.

Exactly how did Jesus do it? I don’t know. What I do know is that it was not a magic act. It was not an illusion. It was not a trick. It was real and it was a miracle. As I have said before, what is impossible for us is *Himpossible* for God. What is impossible for us is *Himpossible* for Jesus, because of who Jesus is – because He is God incarnate, in flesh and blood. You may say this story couldn’t possibly be true, but it is, because nothing is impossible with God.

THE “WHY” BEHIND THE MIRACLE

It was a miracle. It was a supernatural sign pointing to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. The power Jesus displayed to multiply bread and fish to feed this enormous crowd of people is a sign of His deity. Jesus performed this miracle for two reasons: 1) to satisfy the need of every person in the crowd for food (because

every person matters to Jesus); and 2) to enable those with eyes to see, to see that He really is the Son of God and the promised Messiah. I hope you see that.

So, what are we to take away from this miracle of multiplication? First, we've got to see the compassion of Jesus and embrace His call to be like Him. To join His CIA. To put our compassion in action in His service and in His name. Whenever we can.

Second, we need to see and embrace the power of Jesus as it points to His deity. There is no one like Jesus. In His humanity, He is like us in every way, except that He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). In His deity, He is truly and fully God. He is in a class by Himself. He has been given "the name above every name" (Philippians 2:9), and "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to us by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12).

If you don't see Jesus for who He really is, if you fail to acknowledge Him or believe in Him as both fully God and fully man (mysterious as that is), if you neglect or refuse to open your heart and surrender your life to Him in trusting faith, you will miss out on the power of Jesus – His miraculous power – to change hearts (including your own), to heal hurts, to change lives, to mend broken relationships, and, yes, to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, provide for the needy, and generally do things that are humanly impossible.

As I have said before: *Jesus. Makes. Things. Happen.* Do you believe that? The disciples of Jesus were slow to believe. It took them a while to come around.

THREE RULES

Out in the boonies with that huge crowd, they had no idea what Jesus could and would do. They thought the only solution was to send the people away to find food for themselves. As we have seen, Jesus had a different idea. Here are three simple rules we can learn and apply to our lives as followers of Jesus'

1. *Start with what you have.* You may not feel like you have much to offer. On this occasion, all the disciples could come up with were five barley loaves and two small fish. Not much in the grand scheme of things.
2. *Give what you have to Jesus.* Henrietta Mears was a single woman who had an impactful ministry in California for more than 30 years. You may have never heard of her. She once said: "Serving God with our little is the way to make it more; and we must never think that wasted with which God is honored or people are blest" (H. Mears, *Dream Big*). We're not a big church. We don't have all the resources (human and otherwise) that a lot of bigger churches have. The disciples didn't have much. But they gave what they had to Jesus and He used it – He *multiplied* it – to feed the multitudes. Let's give what we have to Jesus. All of it. All of ourselves.

(I think of Peter and John in Acts 3. They have gone to the temple in Jerusalem for the afternoon prayer service. They encounter a crippled man who was carried to the temple courts every day to beg. Instead of avoiding him, Peter and John look him straight in the eye. Peter says to him: “I don’t have any money” – which is what the man wanted – “but what I do have, I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ, walk!” Peter took him by the hand and pulled him up, and that man began to walk and dance and jump, praising God all the while. That happened because Peter gave what he had to Jesus for Him to use.)

Give what you have to Jesus.

3. *Do what Jesus says.* The disciples may not have known what Jesus was going to do, but they did what He told them to do. They got the crowd to sit down in groups, then they passed out the bread and fish, and Jesus made them part of the miracle. (Adapted from Warren Wiersbe, *Matthew: Be Loyal*, 95.)

Maybe there is a miracle God wants to make *you* part of, to make *us* part of, to make *our church* part of. Maybe there are ways (I know there are!) in which He wants us to display His compassion to others and to one another. You know, CIA. Maybe there are ways, too, in which He wants to display His wonder-working power in us or among us or through us in order to make His true identity known to people who do not yet know Him.

Do you think this is possible? I do. It may seem unlikely or even impossible to you. But what is impossible for us when we depend on our own wisdom and strength and resources is *Himpossible* with God.

ALWAYS COUNT TO EIGHT

In his commentary on Matthew, Frederick Dale Bruner says that followers of Jesus “should always count to eight” (Bruner, *The Churchbook*, *Matthew 13-28*, 68; quoted in O’Connell, *Matthew*, 408). As Douglas O’Connell explains, there are seemingly only seven things available to provide for the hungry crowd in this story – five loaves and two fish. But we should always count to eight. We should always include Jesus. We should always count Him and count *on* Him. He is the One we can always count on to provide for us what we need (O’Connell, 408). Don’t stop with the loaves and fish. Always count to eight.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.