

*Matthew 14:13-21, 2014*

Today I want you to think about where the real miracles are in this story of the feeding of the 5,000.

While you are wondering about that, and maybe why I would even suggest that there is a miracle beyond the obvious,

I want to put this story in it's context.

Throughout chapter 13 Matthew paints a picture for us of the crowds who gather around Jesus by the sea to listen and learn from Him. He tries to teach them, and us, through parables what the kingdom of heaven is like, how recognizable it is.

There was the sower, the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, yeast, treasure hidden in a field, a pearl of great value, and the net thrown into the sea.

Chapter 13, although we don't hear the story in our weekend readings, closes with the story of Jesus being run out of his home town because He astounded His friends and family with His wisdom and teaching.

The other gospels say it was because He revealed the prophetic insight into he really is; not just their neighbor and friend, but the Son of God, the long awaited Messiah.

Matthew then opens Chapter 14 with another story we don't hear in our weekend readings about Jesus' cousin, John the

Baptist, being executed by Herod at the request of Herodias' daughter at her mother's prompting.

In **this** story we get a glimpse of how the other half lives, the "rich and shameless."

the part of society who gather around food, drink, and entertainment even at the expense of another person's life to while away the hours.

Then Matthew immediately takes us back to the sea side, and another crowd of people who come seeking relief from the sickness, poverty and hunger.

That is kind of like watching the Kardashians only to be interrupted by a commercial to help feed the starving children in Africa; two very different pictures of life in the same world we all live in.

Our story for today, then, opens with Jesus hearing about the murder of his cousin, John, and He is heartbroken and tries to go off to a place by himself.

But the crowds followed Him from all the towns and when he arrived at that quiet, deserted place He discovers that the crowds are already there, they have arrived ahead of him.

So here is the context of Jesus' day. Jesus is grieving the loss of His cousin and seeking relief from His own pain, and the crowds continue to pursue Him to get relief from their suffering.

This brings us back to the question about the real miracles in the story; what are they?

The first miracle is the compassion with which Jesus welcomes the crowds despite what He has going on in his own life.

Stop and think about that a minute. Would you be ready to welcome crowds of people who need something from you on the day you learn of a family member's passing?

He spends the entire day with the people healing their sick.

In His acts that day Jesus reveals the character of God.

If you go back to the first Chapter of Matthew you read,

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Jesus fulfills this promise of Emmanuel, the presence of God with His people, through the compassionate welcome He always offers them.

How big a deal can it be for God to feed a few thousand people out in the middle of nowhere from a few fish and a little bit of bread? This is the same God who created this universe we live in out of nothing, who created light out of dark, who breathed the very breath of life into all his people, even you?

He was not like the other gods of the 1<sup>st</sup> century who didn't normally care about people like the ones you find in the crowds who follow Jesus.

They were typically dispassionate, far off, unmoved movers of the universe at one extreme,

or at the other end of the spectrum gods who were notorious for using humans as playthings and for ordering the world to their whims.

At their best they were gods who took the side of the rich and powerful standing with people like Herod and his well fed party of guests

sanctioning even the bloody murder of one who tells the truth like John the Baptist to satisfy their evil desires and unquenchable thirst for power.

And yet, here is another 1<sup>st</sup> century god, Jesus, performing wonders not to convince the people that He is the Son of God, or to gain any advantage for himself, but to offer signs of the character of the one true God, as John in his gospel so adamantly insists.

That character is captured in the single word from our gospel lesson, "compassion."

What are the gods like that we worship today:

money, power, alcohol, drugs, sex, excitement, drama, ease of life, self absorption.

There is nothing compassionate about these modern day gods. They trap and kill just as surely as Herod and Herodias killed John.

Well, God's never ending, never failing, continuous compassion may well be the first miracle, and I would suggest that the second is that Jesus used the disciples to carry out this compassionate wonder of God – feeding the people.

In this story the disciples come to Jesus suggesting a solution to the problem of all the hungry people, and His response is,

“...you give them something to eat.”

When they would rather tend to themselves than this hungry mass of men, women and children on the shore of the sea in the middle of nowhere,

Jesus calls on them to get over their self-concern and feed the people.

Just as we look to heaven and bless the bread and wine in Holy Communion, in similar words Jesus looks to heaven and blesses the bread and fish,

and shows us what happens when you focus your vision of the world through the lens of abundance rather than scarcity.

Thank you God for this meal and bless this food.

Despite the disciples skepticism, doubt or preoccupation with themselves, they again follow Jesus, caught up in His words of abundance and gratitude they feed all who had gathered there.

It was the disciples, called by Jesus, who carry out the wonder that reveals God's presence and love for his people -- Emmanuel.

In spite of **our** skepticism, doubt and preoccupation with ourselves these miracles continue today.

Many are the college grad who rather than accept the high paying job with the prominent firm has started their own business built around the vision of providing for the needy or helping conserve creation.

I remember the story of the young man who started his own shoe company for the express purpose of building the capacity to provide shoes for the needy children of his community who would otherwise do without,

and the miracle happened.

The miracle happens when a parent puts aside their personal hopes and dreams to care for a special needs child,

and when a child in need of a father and mother to love and care for them is adopted,

when the volunteer goes to the Bridge of Hope to serve the homeless.

The miracle happens when you offer your pocket change to dig wells in Africa,

when you put your offering in the plate to support the ministry of this congregation out of your abundance.

It is the followers of Jesus who reveal the **first miracle** of the continuing compassion of God for this world today through the offering of your abundant time, your energy, your money,

your abundant love and care for the needy and creation,

and who reveal the **second miracle**, that God chooses to be Emmanuel through you.

It is you. You are God's miracle worker today.