



SPIRIT IN THE DESERT

Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Grace and peace to you from the mystery and whom we live, move, and have our being

It is unfortunate that Jesus is famous from doing miracles. But I get it. This miracle of feeding five thousand people with only five loaves and two fish would have chopped all the Food Networks Chopped Champions! They at least had three items to create a meal for three judges. Jesus only had two items and still is being judged!

Jesus may have become famous because of his miracles, but the people that were present did not have only the head knowledge of the miracle, they were there for the experience.

What they witnessed and experienced they did not need to defend.

Have you ever tried to explain a hilarious event or spectacular occurrence to others who weren't there? You will eventually become exhausted after receiving responses that are not equal to your experience. Then you just stop and say, "well I guess you had to be there." You don't need them to have belief in it for it to be true for you. In the same way experiencing God is bigger than belief in God.

Maybe it was just as frustrating for those who were there to hear others telling and retelling the stories of events they themselves had witnessed. Eventually, those stories were written down and made their way to us.

Today, the Bible story is often subtitled, "*Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand!*" Yet even that subtitle isn't entirely accurate. There were certainly more than five thousand people present

because women and children weren't counted. They only valued the five thousand men, they are the “VIPs” in these stories. Women and children were just “P’s.”

The “I guess you had to be there” experience for is now past. What was eventually recorded on paper is almost a hundred years removed and the most important headline of the story became *Jesus feeds the five thousand*.

Jesus himself said to the people in Capernaum after the miracle: “... you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate some of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that lasts for eternal life...”

If the sign, wonders, and miracles were not enough for them to believe, then what makes us think they will work for our belief now?

So, I’m trying to imagine a different headline. Maybe it would read:

“People follow man in desperation for hope and healing.”

So desperate were the people, they did not pack food for the journey. They were so captivated by the message, that they followed Jesus into emptiness.

When their leader quietly went away for some solitude even his students panicked. They suddenly became the ones responsible for the five thousand who had followed them. It was late in the evening, and the disciples had no food to give them.

There were some who found Jesus when they had heard that he went away by himself. Jesus saw their desperation and determination to find hope and healing. Compassion called him away from his needed solitude and he began healing them.

Not only were the people desperate for healing; they would soon become a hungry crowd, far from their home. The disciples wanted Jesus to tell them to go home. But instead, Jesus gives the disciples a command they could not possibly fulfill. Jesus said, “Feed them.”

There’s nothing difficult to interpret here to place Jesus in a good light. He is asking the disciples to do something they cannot do!

So often we’ve heard people say, “God never gives us more than we can handle.” Well, this little piece of dialogue shoots that one down real good.

As a young dad with two young daughters, I experienced a deep period of desperation. My circumstances seemed impossible. As I sought answers to my situation, I became desperate. I needed wisdom. I needed my dad and his guidance.

I hadn’t just lost my dad at the age of four, God had irresponsibly taken him from me and left me alone in this desperate adult moment.

I visited my father's grave which I rarely did. I always knew I would have to see 'Henry Rojas' etched on the tombstone. But now, more than ever, I needed my dad.

Hoping to have an epiphany of fatherly wisdom from a man who loved his children so much, I stood staring at his name.

But there was nothing. No miraculous words of comfort. Silence. In that moment, I did something I had never done before. I yelled at God.

I looked up and said, "What were you thinking? What made you think it was a good idea to take a boy's father? To leave a young boy—and now a grown man—without direction?"

I already had broken the barrier of some unforgivable sin, so I went even further and shouted, "What more do you want from me?!"

Somewhere Inside of me, I heard the words, "give me your daughter's. I want your daughters." I'm not proud of it, but I called God an SOB.

In the next hour the epiphany came. It became very clear to me that I was holding tightly to control and that I could not do this alone. I needed to recognize my inadequacies and my resistance to letting go of the illusions of control. My daughters are not my possessions.

In telling the disciples to feed the five thousand, Jesus was making them aware of the reality of their inability to do things on their own. To let go of the expectations, they should be better than they are and should be enough all the time. That they can let go of the false expectation that they should be completely adequate.

The disciples needed to face their reality and admit their powerlessness. They declared to Jesus "We have nothing."

Typically, when I find myself like the desperate crowd or as an overwhelmed disciple thinking I'm not enough, it feels like defeat. I may pretend to be enough outwardly, but my insides are overwhelmed. To pretend to have enough or be enough is inauthentic to a God who accepts us where we are.

Jesus didn't have compassion just for those who wanted healing that day. He had compassion for his disciples who felt overwhelmed by their situation.

Jesus asks them a different question. He said, "what do you have?"

That question opened their imagination. They looked around and responded, "we have five loaves and two fish." If I had been there, I probably would have responded like Dr. Seuss's *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*—and then the whole class would have had to stay after school.

But I digress.

Jesus now gives them a different instruction after their moment of clarity: “Bring what you have to me.”

He’s asking them to let go of the little that they possess. How seemingly unkind. Now they genuinely have nothing but open, empty hands.

Jesus takes the loaves and the fish, and I imagine him praying something like this,” God thank you for what is obviously inadequate”

Into their empty hands, he places food from the abundance of God’s grace. The disciples now found themselves participating in God’s Nature. What a whirlwind for the disciples to go from empty hands and desperate hearts to participating in Gods enoughness.

The new headline might read:

“Disciples and Jesus Create Merger to Solve Hunger Problem.”

I no longer need to “believe” in the unimaginable to be a follower. Belief is no longer the prerequisite to experiencing God. Welcoming God into an overwhelming life is always bringing me those “you had to be there” moments with God. Sometimes they are in community and sometimes in a solitary place. When alone with the mystery we call God, there are ineffable experiences.

Thank you, God, for what is obviously inadequate. I give 100% of it.

Thank you for not expecting me to be enough, to be right, or to be in control.

Amen