

## THE MIRACULOUS MEAL

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 4, 2018  
Based on II Kings 4:42–44, Mark 6:31–44; Mark 8:1–9a**

Today's sermon is the continuation of a sermon series entitled, "Journey to Jerusalem." The story of Jesus' journey is characterized by the accounts of numerous miracles. We heard about several healing miracles over the past two weeks; and in our gospel readings this morning we heard about another kind of miracle, which is classified as a "nature miracle"—where Jesus brought about some extraordinary event affecting the elements in the surrounding world. In this case it was the miracle of feeding a multitude quite abundantly with an extremely small amount of food. When the gospel writers tell a story like this, it is not simply because it is an astounding story; it is because the event tells us something about Jesus. It tells us something about the identity of Jesus—that he is the Son of God—and it tells us something important about what Jesus can do in our lives. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Of the dozens of miracles reported in the New Testament, there is one miracle that is reported in all four gospels—the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, also called the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. The fact that all four gospels contain this account says that this miracle has something particularly important to tell us about Jesus. There is also a second, very similar miracle—the feeding of the 4000—that is reported in Matthew and Mark. Sometimes people want to think that maybe these are just two different versions of the same event; but Matthew and Mark do not think so. They report these stories as two distinct events; and there is in fact one critical and very meaningful difference between these stories which we will note shortly.

The story of the feeding of the 5000 took place along the Sea of Galilee. The gospels tell of how Jesus, in the midst of preaching and healing, felt that he and the disciples needed some time for refreshment, so they headed out in a boat, and by some combination of sailing and rowing, arrived slowly at a remote location. The crowds, however, followed them around the lake on foot, so that when Jesus pulled up on shore, he was confronted once again by a mob of people. You would think he would have said, "O man, we can't catch a break!" But, our passage reports, "he had compassion," and began teaching the crowd again. [*He had compassion for them . . . and he began to teach them. Mark 6:34*] Here is a beautiful picture of the love of Jesus and his continual readiness to give of himself for others.

Jesus must have been an inspiring speaker, because no one ever got bored. Eventually, the hour became late, and the disciples urged Jesus to dismiss the crowd, so that people could journey to nearby villages to get something eat. Jesus responded saying, "You give them something to eat." (Mark 6:37) This suggestion floored the disciples. It was like being at the Superbowl and having someone suggest that you should find something

for everyone to eat. Someone among the disciples did a quick calculation and figured out that to buy enough food for all these people would cost 200 denarii, that is, about 200 days' wages. What Jesus was asking seemed impossible.

Jesus then asked how much food they had on hand. "Five loaves of bread, and two fish" was the reply. If you wonder where they got even the five loaves and two fish, the answer is given to us in the gospel of John. John reports that it was Andrew specifically who answered Jesus' question, and what Andrew said was, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish." (John 6:9)

It is interesting that of all the people in this crowd, it was a boy who had the presence of mind to bring some food along. I expect his mother sent it with him. Or maybe it is because boys are always thinking about what there is to eat. Why didn't anybody else plan ahead? The reason, of course, is because this had all spontaneously developed. Jesus had taken off in a boat, the people felt so drawn to Jesus they wanted to follow him, and they did not have time to run home and put together a picnic basket. But now there was a huge crowd and one boy's lunch. Andrew commented further about those few loaves and fishes by saying, "But what are they among so many people?" (John 6:9)

Jesus called upon the people to sit down. He blessed and broke the loaves and the fish, and he had the disciples begin to distribute the food among the people. As the baskets passed, people pulled food out, and pulled more food out, and kept pulling food out. In the end, after all the people had eaten their fill, each of the twelve disciples brought forward a basket full of leftovers.

Later, Jesus would ask His disciples whether they understood this miracle. ["Do you not yet understand?"—Mark 8:21] The miracle, in other words, was not simply a display of amazing power on Jesus' part; the miracle was designed to convey a key message to Jesus' followers. So what was the message?

The message, first of all, was that *small offerings by the power of Jesus become great*. Every once in a while, Kent State University announces a gift in the millions. Our church is not remotely in that sort of position. Our largest gifts last year were in the tens of thousands, and most folks are giving a good bit less than that. We may feel that our offerings are small. But something amazing happens in this story when a boy is willing to share his five loaves and two fish. It does not look like much. But through the working of Christ it makes an enormous impact.

This sort of thing happens in our church all the time. We each make our gifts, which may seem modest compared with the megadollars that make the news, but through the working of Christ the impact of those gifts is multiplied, so that finally as a church we are able to make an enormous impact in the world for good. Last year, our congregation as a whole gave more than \$176,000 for mission work, which is making a real difference for mission projects in our community and around the globe. You can find a summary of that mission work on our web site or in the new missions brochures that have been placed

around the building. It is good to recognize that the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes continues to repeat itself today, as the gifts of God's people are multiplied in their effect by God's empowerment through the church.

Thus the story encourages us to share out of what we have. Along this line, some commentators have suggested that maybe at the original multiplication of the loaves and fishes, there was something more operating than purely the mystical power of Christ. Maybe it was the case that as that boy shared his food, other people in the crowd were inspired to share food that they also had brought but had squirreled away in their knapsacks. As more and more people shared, the sharing kept multiplying until everyone in the end had enough. Thus the miracle involved the opening of people's hearts to give for others.

Perhaps there was something of this kind of sharing at work that day; and yet it must be noted that this idea *in itself* cannot "explain" the miracle. If people had brought that much food along, it would have been apparent to the disciples, and they would not have been worried about finding food to begin with. Moreover, all four gospel writers never would have recounted this story if it were simply a case of contagious generosity leading to a giant potluck. There is a miraculous working of Christ in this event far beyond the resources of the crowd. Nevertheless, it is valuable to note exactly *how* Christ works in this miracle. When the disciples report that the people have no food, Christ does not simply shower down bread from heaven. Jesus' first act is to say to the disciples, "You give them something to eat" (Mark 6:37), and then he makes use of the boy's offering, and puts the disciples to work in distributing the baskets. Thus the story is a picture of how God works *through human involvement*.

Sometimes when people look at all the needs of the world, they want God to do something about it. God's word to us very likely is the same as Jesus' word to the disciples, "You do something about it." The story draws us to offer what we have so that God can equip and empower us to make an impact on the world around us.

At the same time, the gospel story offers an enormous word of hope whenever it becomes clear to us that our own resources are simply inadequate, for the miracle finally is a demonstration of how God will generously provide, and will vastly expand upon what we have. This was not the first time that God miraculously provided food for a large group of people in need. You could think of how God fed the people with manna in the wilderness; or there is a very close parallel with that story from II Kings, where a man brought an offering of twenty loaves of barley to the prophet Elisha. Note that it was also barley loaves in the gospel story; keep in mind that these would have been relatively small loaves. Elisha told him to give the loaves to a company of 100 people. The man objected that it was not nearly enough, but Elisha proclaimed that by God's power it would be plenty, and indeed the people ate and had food left over. [II Kings 4:42-44]

The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 was the same sort of miracle but on a much larger scale. Although this miracle is often called the feeding of the 5000, there were even more people than that, because Mark tells us that there were 5000 “men” present—the original Greek work here means specifically adult males. The implication is that there were also women and children; and indeed Matthew clarifies the matter in his recounting of the story, as he concludes it by saying that the number was 5000, “plus women and children.” [*Those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 14:21*] This was a huge crowd to be fed by a tiny bit of food. The story thus demonstrates how God works through Christ in ways far beyond even the amazing miracles of Old Testament times, and certainly far beyond our own abilities. So whenever we face a major challenge, even if it seems insurmountable and we feel that our resources are not nearly enough, the story of the loaves and fishes summons us to look to Christ in faith, to offer what we have, and to have confidence that the Lord will be at work to abundantly provide.

There is a significant image in our passage along this line, when we are told in verse 34 that Jesus saw that “the people were like sheep without a shepherd,” and then later in verse 39 it says that Jesus had them sit down “on the green grass.” Mark specifically lifts up the sheep and shepherd idea and mentions green grass, because he wants us to remember Psalm 23—“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” [Psalm 23:1-2] In the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, we see how Jesus is the good shepherd; He cares for His people and provides for their need.

Jesus of course in the miracle provides first of all for the physical hunger of the people; but the miracle also is a symbol of how Jesus will answer our spiritual hunger. When Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and distributes it to his followers, he foreshadows how he would later institute the sacrament of Communion. Significantly, the gospel of John reports that following the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus continued with his teaching where he said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never hunger.” (John 6:35) In our sharing in Communion today, we will have an opportunity to open ourselves to how Christ would answer the hunger in our soul.

It might seem that the miracle of the feeding of the 4000 is simply a repeat of the feeding of the 5000, with the same meaning; but there is one very significant difference between the two stories. The feeding of the five thousand took place on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in Jewish territory. The feeding of the four thousand took place on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in Gentile territory. This difference would have been obvious to early readers of the gospels, and it would have been underlined by the fact that in each of the stories, in the original Greek, there are different Greek words used for the baskets in which the leftovers were collected. The story of the feeding of the five thousand uses a word that describes a Jewish type of basket that would have been

used in a Jewish crowd, and the story of the feeding of the 4000 uses a word that denotes a Gentile type of basket, in use in a Gentile crowd.

Thus Jesus did this same type of miracle among two very different groups of people, groups who were very much divided in his day, and this brings us a central message—Christ is the answer to the spiritual hunger of everyone, and Christ is reaching with God's grace to all. In short, there is a place at the table of the Lord for everyone. This also is a key truth that we declare in Communion. All are invited to the feast of the Lord, so that together we might share in the goodness of God, and might experience how God will abundantly provide for us today.