

A Wild Exuberance!

Matthew 14:13-21 (Common English Bible)

When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. That evening his disciples came and said to him, “This is an isolated place and it’s getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

But Jesus said to them, “There’s no need to send them away. You give them something to eat.”

They replied, “We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish.”

He said, “Bring them here to me.” He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.

All four Gospels include the feeding for the five thousand. I wonder why? Of all the miracles Jesus performed, how come they use this one? Granted, it’s impressive. But Jesus did other impressive miracles. He raised the dead, healed the sick, stilled storms, changed water into wine. Why this one?

I visited Tabgha, the traditional site of this story, when I made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2009. My group visited two other holy sites on the shores of the Sea of Galilee before we arrived at the Chapel of Multiplication. It was August and the weather very similar to here. I was hot, sweaty and tired from a full day.

The chapel was packed with pilgrims and religious tourists. I heard Italian, Korean, French, German, Spanish, African and other languages spoken. There were lots of flashing cameras and jostling for the best shot of the altar and mosaic floors. It didn’t feel very holy or mysterious or miraculous. I jokingly asked another pastor in the group “Did you see any leftovers on the rock under the altar?”

Later as I reflected on the day and the prayer that our chaplain used for evening vespers (the same prayer we used today) I was struck by the phrase - “a wild exuberance”. It’s a fitting description of this story and place. It’s fitting description of God’s grace. Exuberance means joyously unrestrained and enthusiastic, excessive in degree, size and extent, produced in extreme abundance.

Wild exuberance. That’s why this story is found in all four gospels. That’s why early Christians commemorated Tabgha and its beautiful crazy mosaic floors. This is a story about God’s abundance, God’s generosity, God’s extravagance. And not just when it comes to bread, but life and love, hope and joy, peace and wonder.

When it comes to a miracle story, it's easy to get stuck in the details. We want an explanation. We want to know how it happened. How did Jesus feed 5,000 men, plus women and children, with 5 loaves and two fish and end up with twelve baskets of leftovers?

Matthew doesn't tell us. But he does say the miracle happened in a "deserted, lonely place" which is code for where the unexpected happens. Jesus goes there after hearing the news about John the Baptist's beheading. He wants to be alone because he lost his prophet, the man who baptized him and devoted his life to preparing the way of the Lord.

Jesus withdraws in a boat to a lonely place. But the crowds follow on foot. They're sick. They're sad. They're hungry. Jesus has compassion on them. His heart goes out to them. He spends the afternoon walking among them, laying his hands on them, and saying things they need to hear.

When evening falls, the disciples find Jesus and suggest he send everyone away to buy supper in a nearby village. They're just being practical. Night is coming and they are in the middle of nowhere. Their stomachs are starting to growl. It's time to build a campfire and eat the little bit of food they brought with them. It's time to take care of themselves and everyone else do the same.

Jesus has a better idea. "Don't send the crowd away". He knows they all need more than a hot meal. He knows that after very bad news, it doesn't matter what you eat as long as you eat it with someone. He knows that in a deserted, lonely place, mysterious and miraculous things can happen.

Jesus tells his disciples, "You give them something to eat." I wish I could have seen their reaction. "Give them something to eat? Who - Us? You're the one in charge, Jesus. All we have is five loaves and two salted fish. It's hardly a snack for twelve men. Let alone, 5,000 men, plus women and children."

It's wild and crazy and preposterous. The disciples operate out of a sense of scarcity. They look at the crowd, see no picnic baskets, and assume no one has anything to eat. They look at their own meager resources and assume it isn't enough for them much less all the other people.

Jesus has a different perspective. He operates out a sense of abundance. He looks at the same situation and sees plenty – plenty of time, plenty of food, plenty of possibilities. Jesus knows wherever there's plenty of God there's plenty of everything else.

He asks the disciples to bring their food to him. He orders the crowds to sit down on the green grass (another sign of exuberance). He blesses the five loaves and two fish in front of everyone, trusting God will provide. Can you imagine it happen?

Someone punches her neighbor and says, "You're not going to believe this. Jesus just said grace over five loaves and two fish. Now his guys are passing them out to the crowd. It's the craziest thing I've ever seen. But don't get excited – it'll all be gone before it gets to us."

Some of the crowd laugh out loud. While others are mystified. Some are embarrassed for Jesus, promising so much with so little. While others are touched by the way the disciples hand over all they have. Touched by Jesus' confidence that God will be exuberant.

I imagine when the people looked into that basket of food being passed around, they felt the food hidden in their pockets start burning a hole. You know most folk had something – a bit of lamb wrapped in a grape leaf, a few pieces of dried fruit, a chunk of bread left over from breakfast. They brought a little food with them before heading to a deserted, lonely place. It wasn't enough to share, so they kept it hidden and waited for a chance to wander off and sneak a bite.

When the bread basket came around, full of scraps, everyone is careful not to take too much. Everyone wants Jesus wild exuberant idea to work. So, they begin to put their own bread in the basket. Instead of taking something out, people start putting something in.

The meal grows and grows and when the disciples collect the leftovers, there are twelve baskets of bread. All kinds of bread – wheat, sourdough, pumpernickel, rye, raisin, pita, bagels and a muffin or two. Every kind of bread imaginable is leftover, from a meal for maybe 10,000 people. And it starts with only 5 loaves and two fish.

This is the miracle of exuberance. Human beings being generous, sharing what they have even when it's not enough. A crowd of strangers moving from a sense of scarcity to a sense of plenty. People overcoming their fear of hunger, giving up their need to protect themselves, refusing to play to old game of what-is-mine-is-mine-and-what-is-yours-is-yours.

The mosaic of the two fish and five loaves on our communion cup and plate has a surprise. Let's see the imagine again. You can see the two fish on either side of the basket. The bread inside the basket are the smaller circles. But when count them, you discover only four loaves. Is this a mistake? Did the artist forget the story?

No. The fifth loaf is where ever Christians gather to break bread in Jesus' name. The fifth loaf is here with us on our communion plate. The fifth loaf is in your hands and mine. The fifth loaf represents God's abundance, God's extravagance, God's generosity.

God's wild exuberance is always available. It begins when we bring what we have to Jesus so he can bless it and break it and share it with a world in need. It begins when we participate in God's multiplying miracle at this table and out there in God's world of wild exuberance. Amen.

June 6, 2021 (Communion)

David Whiteley, Pastor

Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church