

## **Loaves & Fishes (Matthew 14:13-21)**

**August 2, 2020 | 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN | Pastor Katherine Museus Dabay**

Our Monday evening Bible study has been reading the Gospel of Matthew with the help of N. T. Wright, an Anglican pastor and bishop as well as a top-notch New Testament scholar. His book *Matthew for Everyone* includes short reflections on each passage in the Gospel. When we read his commentary on today's Gospel reading – the feeding of the 5,000 (plus women and children), I was so moved by it that I knew I needed to earmark it for when the reading came up in worship. And just a few weeks later – here we are! So I'm going to begin this morning by sharing N. T. Wright's mini-sermon with you.

*Come and be a character in this story...To begin with, cast your mind back to the last time you were really, really sad. After the death of a parent, perhaps, or a close friend. After you didn't get the job you'd set your heart on. After you had to move out of the house you had loved. What you needed and wanted most was to hide away and be quiet. To reflect, perhaps to pray: but above all to be still, and not have people bother you.*

*Then supposing the quiet place you chose was invaded by hundreds of others. The little church you thought you'd slip inside was full of a wedding party. The lonely hillside where, surely, you could be private was covered in cheerful hikers. How would you react?*

*Jesus' reaction here is the more remarkable. He had lost John, his cousin and colleague. He had lost him in a manner which must have warned Jesus of what lay ahead for him, too. Yet when he slips away to be quiet and alone, the crowds discover and throng all around him. And his reaction is not anger or frustration, but compassion. He translates his sorrow over John, and perhaps his sorrow over himself, into sorrow for them. Before the outwards and visible works of power, healing the sick, comes the inward and invisible work of power, in which Jesus transforms his own feelings into love for those in need.*

*You have come into the story of Jesus, perhaps, because you've been touched yourself by that compassion. Imagine yourself as one of the disciples – not a leader, just one of the Twelve, or perhaps one of their other friends or cousins, hanging around on the edge. You see how Jesus cares for people, and you'd like to care for them too. So you think what might be best for them, and come to him with a suggestion. Wouldn't it be good to send them away now, so that they could go and buy food rather than all getting hungry here, miles away from anywhere?*

*Jesus is always delighted when people around him come up with ideas which show that they're thinking of the needs of others. But often what he has to do is to take those ideas and so something startling with them. If you really care for them, he says, why don't you give them something to eat? This is, perhaps, the typical note of vocation. Our small idea of how to care for people gets bounced back at us with what seems a huge and impossible proposal. You protest. I can't do it! I haven't got the time. I haven't got the energy. I haven't got the ability. All I have is...*

*Ah, but that's the next step, and again typical of how God's calling works. By hanging around Jesus, you've had an idea. It wasn't quite in focus, but your main intention – in this case, that people should be fed – is on target. Jesus proposes achieving that aim by a different means. You say it's impossible – but you're prepared to give him the little you've got, if it'll be any good. Of course it means you'll go hungry yourself...but by now you're in too deep to stop. Once the power of Jesus' compassion has begun to catch you up in its flow, you can't stop.*

*What precisely Jesus does with what we give him is so mysterious and powerful that it's hard to describe in words. Imagine yourself standing there, while Jesus, surrounded by thousands of people, takes this pitifully small amount of food, hardly enough for two people, let alone a crowd, and prays over it. He thanks God for it. He breaks it, and gives it to you and the others, and you give it to...one person after another after another, without knowing what's happening or how.*

*Think through how it's happened. Being close to Jesus has turned into the thought of service; Jesus takes the thought, turns it inside out (making it more costly, of course), and gives it back to you as a challenge. In puzzled response to the challenge, you offer what you've got, knowing it's quite inadequate (but again costly); and the same thing happens. He takes it, blesses it, and gives it to you – and your job now is to give it to everybody else.*

*That is how it works whenever some is close enough to Jesus to catch a glimpse of what he's doing and how they could help. We blunder in with our ideas. We offer, uncomprehending, what little we have. Jesus takes ideas, loaves and fishes, money, a sense of humour, time, energy, talents, love, artistic gifts, skill with words, quickness of eye or fingers, whatever we have to offer. He holds them before his father with prayer and blessing. Then, breaking them so they are ready for use, he gives them back to us to give to those who need them.*

*And now they are both ours and not ours. They are both what we had in mind and not what we had in mind. Something greater and different, more powerful and mysterious, yet also our own. It is part of genuine Christian service, at whatever level, that we look*

*on in amazement to see what God has done with the bits and pieces we dug out of our meagre resources to offer to [God].*<sup>1</sup>

I think about the beautiful and meaningful lesson offered by N. T. Wright, and then I try bring it into what we're all going through these days. The problems of our time feel overwhelming. More overwhelming than how to feed a crowd of people.

That overwhelming feeling is actually pretty normal. If two years ago we had listed the major problems in society, we would have felt small in comparison to them, too. But it feels like a different order of overwhelming right now, doesn't it? Maybe what is different right now is that the pandemic isn't only an "out there" problem that *maybe* affects us or *maybe* affects a few people we know – the pandemic has brought huge changes to all of us and to everything.

Those of us who are parents are reeling from making decisions about how to educate our kids. Those of us who are students are balancing feelings of wanting to see friends, wanting to continue learning and moving towards goals, with wanting to be safe. Those of us who live in senior living apartments have been unable to see much of the people we care about for months now. Our congregation's leadership is constantly struggling with the questions of whether and how we could gather in person – wanting to meet, wanting to keep the congregation strong and active – but also feeling the great responsibility of keeping one another safe and healthy. Some of us are struggling with job loss or fearing for the future.

All that is overwhelming enough – and then there's an even bigger picture to think about.

The economy is taking a huge hit. The richest people in the world are getting richer, while the poor are getting poorer and the fight against poverty may be set back by a decade.

And let's not forget the most fundamental problems of the pandemic, the main problems that sometimes seem to get lost in all the conversations: that all this is happening because people are getting sick; hospitals are being overwhelmed with patients; and people are dying.

With a disaster as far-reaching and devastating as this – what can we possibly offer to Jesus in his mission to care for the world?

In our anti-racism discussion group this Sunday we will be talking about an episode of Emmaneul Acho's YouTube series *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*

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1 N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) pg. 185-187.

where he interviews a pastor. At the end of the interview, Acho asks if the pastor has any advice to share with Christians wanting to do something to stop racism but who feel daunted by the task. The pastor says: “Don’t be intimidated and don’t minimize what you have.” ... “We know we serve a God that uses small things and turns it into more.”<sup>2</sup>

Good advice for those of us seeking to cast down racism from its throne. Good advice for those of us wanting to care for one another and the world during the pandemic. Good advice generally, when we want to help but feel at a loss for how to even begin, what “little-ol’-me” can even do.

“Don’t be intimidated and don’t minimize what you have.” ... “We know we serve a God that uses small things and turns it into more.”

So for now, think of just one thing you can do. Call a lonely friend or send out cards to our church members living in senior homes. If you can spare even just \$10, donate to an organization helping those more in need than you. Wear a mask. Do what you can to keep yourself, your family, and the people around you healthy. Treat people making big decisions with compassion and pray for them – even when you also need to speak your mind to them. Go vote and elect leaders who will make caring decisions. Last week I heard a retired teacher offer to help parents who are learning to homeschool on the fly.

Everyone of us can do at least one thing. Think of what your one thing is, and hold it in your mind for a moment. Now offer it to God to be part of the work God is doing in the world. Imagine Jesus taking it, thanking God for this thing you have to offer, and then breaking it to share. Believe that Jesus can make this offering go even farther than you think it can – if you’re willing to follow him, even when it gets more costly than you first planned.

Keep impinging this, but now zoom out on the picture. Imagine other people in their homes, making their own offerings to God. Remember that they each have talents and resources different than yours. Remember that you are not offering help all on your own – you are part of the worldwide Body of Christ, created by God with different gifts, all called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be part of the work that God is already doing in this world in this time.

Let us pray:

God of Power and Compassion: We thank you for the miracles you worked in ancient times, in the time of Jesus – and the miracles you still work today. When we feel fearful,

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Lentz, pastor of Hillsong Church in NYC, in conversation with Emmanuel Acho in “Race vs Religion,” *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*, Ep. 7, 28 July 2020. Online: <https://youtu.be/7BCScklTfs0> Accessed 4 August 2020.

weary, hopeless, or daunted by the pain of the world, we ask you to send your Spirit to grow our faith, not in this world, but in you. Help us to see what you have given us to offer. Give us a vision of your Son taking our small offerings and multiplying them like loaves and fishes, until all are fed, all are healed, and are loved. It is in the powerful name of Jesus we pray. Amen.