

Albany Presbyterian Church

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Feeding of the Five Thousand is one of the most loved stories in the Bible. This is also one of the few stories that appear in all four gospels: Matthew 14: 13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:12-17 and John 6:1-14.

Jesus was on a mountain in the neighborhood of the Sea of Tiberias, and many people followed him there. There, Jesus taught and healed people all day. According to John, the people followed him there because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. There was a healing of a boy whose father was a royal official in chapter 4. There was a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years, waiting to be healed by the water of Bethesda in chapter 5. It was nearly evening; according to Matthew, the disciples first came to Jesus, asking him to send the crowd away to go into the villages nearby to buy themselves some food. In Matthew, the disciples were concerned for the people's well-being. But, according to John, while Jesus already knew what he would do, his disciples had no idea, so he asked Philip what he thought and dealt with what Andrew brought as the least of their resources from a boy who brought them fish and barley cakes. Getting the people to sit down on the grass, Jesus blesses the offering of bread and fish and feeds the multitude of people, including five thousand men, until they all are satisfied.

Ginger Barfield, a New Testament professor, and commentator on this passage, says one of the unique ways this story of the feeding of the five thousand invites us to think about is the question of who Jesus is. She says the best way to answer that question is by asking who were the people who needed Jesus. The needs create expectations, encounters, and interpretations.

Firstly, It was the crowds who needed Jesus. They came searching for him everywhere. Verse 2 says a great crowd followed Jesus because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. Jesus was there feeding them with five loaves and two fish; when they encountered Jesus, they began interpreting the signs in terms of who Jesus was; they thought Jesus had to be the prophet who came into the world (6.14). They thought he could even be their King; they would make him king by force. (6.15). But these were not who Jesus was, so John says Jesus withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

Secondly, it was his disciples who needed Jesus. They witnessed Jesus performing miracles, healing many, and doing many unexplainable and remarkable things, not to mention his ministry displaying divine power. "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite," Philip responded. "All we have is this." Andrew, Simon's brother, brought Jesus what the boy had brought: five small barley loaves and two small fish. "How far will they go among so many?" It's unclear if the disciples knew what was about to unfold, even as they distributed the food and gathered the leftovers.

Augustine (of Hippo, one of the church fathers) says there is God in everything and everywhere, and there is a miracle in which God turned ordinary things into something great for his purpose. He asks, "Who, after all, even now feeds the whole world but is the one who creates the crops from a few grains? Just as he multiplies a few grains into the crops, so too did he multiply the five loaves in his hands, for there was power in the hands of Christ. Those five loaves were seeds of a kind, not indeed committed to the earth but seeds multiplied by the one who made the heaven and earth." And miracles are these things, he said, "though unusually, God catches our attention."

He also says miracles are like a book written in beautiful calligraphy. We will not just look at the beautiful letters on the book's pages, not just admire the artistry in producing such a work of art without reading what he was saying to us. The miracles of Jesus are not just displays of power; they are proof of his identity and are also like a book. Stopping at the miracle's power is like admiring the handwriting without reading the words in the book. Our challenge is to ask what the miracle has to say to us.

What does this story tell us about our needs, expectations, encounters, and interpretations? Do we follow Jesus because of the signs? Do we see what Jesus wants to communicate? What miracles do you see in your own life? What of God caught your attention lately? And what did that say to you?

For Mitchell, it was a journey. A few weeks ago, Mitchell asked to be baptized after a long journey. He has been preparing for today with Warren and me for several weeks. He will share his testimony about how he experienced God and how his faith journey has begun. He is making a public declaration of his faith, giving his heart and his life to Jesus. Together, we will be invited to think about our faith journey, reflecting on our needs, expectations, encounters, and interpretations of how we experience Jesus and his Holy Spirit.

We are the people who need Jesus, and we are to see Jesus in everything around us. We are the church of Christ written and are being written in beautiful artistry of the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds us in his prayer for the church in Ephesus that we are to have the love of Christ out of all God's glorious riches. Paul says God may strengthen us with power through his Spirit in our inner being so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, being rooted and established in love, may have the power to grasp how wide and long, high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. According to the power at work in us, God can do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine. To him be the glory in the church and Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

God's work in our lives always exceeds our imagination and expectations. Yet, extraordinary things that people experience, even feeding the multitude among us, only sometimes these things catch our eyes. But in all these things, God demonstrates the great and amazing abundance of God's blessing and the overflowing riches of his grace, whether big or small, to communicate his love and power for us even in our ordinary lives and with our small five loaves of bread and two fish, we have confidence in God, who can do all things, who also loves us and blesses us always. Thanks be to God. Amen.