

*Setting The Table*

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Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

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My parents were zealous picnic planners. My mother would begin by interviewing all of us for sandwich preferences. In other words, because we never had anything but bologna, she asked us if we wanted our bologna with or without cheese, with mustard or mayo, with relish or without. While she wrapped the bologna sandwiches in waxed paper and labeled them, my father was responsible for creating gallons of fruit punch made out of Zarex and frozen juice concentrate. Sandwiches, punch, fruit, brownies and kids were all packed into the car and off we went.

Inveterate picnickers such as my parents never let weather be a consideration on the day a picnic was scheduled. One time, all of us, plus my grandparents and my aunt were squeezed in the car at a lake, in a torrential rainstorm, with the windows closed, eating our sandwiches because by all that was good and holy, we would not be intimidated by the rain. Normal people would have checked the weather before starting out. Normal people would turn around because of the rain, go home and eat on the back porch. We were not normal people. We were proud, defiant, picnic people, sweating in the enclosed, crowded car as we ate those darned bologna sandwiches. Trust me, we ate very quickly that day.

I mention this little scenario of my childhood in context with the episode of Jesus feeding 5,000 people, not counting women and children. What we don't hear in this morning's passage is the reason why Jesus chose to go into the wilderness and became surrounded by a great mass of humanity in that desolate area. The previous verses in Matthew's Gospel describe how word had come to Jesus that John the Baptist had been killed by Herod. Jesus and those disciples who had originally followed John were shocked and needed to have time to grieve. Quietly, Jesus and his friends left the town by boat and went to a secluded area. Not realizing what an imposition they were on those in mourning, folks in the community who were accustomed to having daily conversations with Jesus went to find him. They thought nothing of walking away from chores and responsibilities to journey on foot through the wilderness to the isolated place where they knew Jesus liked to go to pray, and thousands did just that.

I imagine that Jesus and his friends took their time going to that place. I find that those times that I spend on the water to be both relaxing and healing. And for those who were friends of and had been followers of John, the time of peace on the boat was necessary. It must have seemed like a living nightmare to hear of John's death and the senseless manner in which it was carried out. So, those hours in the boat; those hours of quiet were perhaps used by them all to come to terms with both the loss of John and what could be peril to their own lives. Thus, they brought the boat to that isolated place of prayer and healing.

When they landed and Jesus saw the crowd, he put his own pain aside, took pity on them and opened his heart in compassion. What did he teach them, I wonder? Did he reminisce about John's faithfulness and courage? Did he remind them of John's message of repentance? Did he call on them to transform their own lives and live out those new

lives in courage and faith? Did he warn them that the path he invited them to follow was far from easy? The hours passed and no one wanted to leave. This was the setting for one of the most beloved of Jesus' miracles.

There are two schools of thought among scripture scholars. One group takes the position that those famous five loaves and two fishes were actually miraculously multiplied and fed all those people. The other group declares that the miracle was not a multiplication of loaves and fishes but a sudden willingness of folks to share the supplies they had brought with those who sat around them. Because I have been to the desert wilderness of Israel and Jordan and seen the barren and dry hills, from the comfort of a tourist bus, well supplied with water, I am inclined to agree with the second group.

My parents' preparation for a mere picnic in an area where food, water and emergency services were readily available is a contemporary model for the mindset of folks who lived in and accommodated themselves to the potentially dangerous wilderness. If my parents in a modern society would so thoroughly prepare themselves for a brief excursion; how much more would people in ancient times do the same? No one would consider going anywhere without water. No one would step far from home territory without bringing some food supplies.

This account is a parable of the kingdom played out with the participation of all those women, men and children. Think on it for a moment. It was late in the afternoon, getting close to suppertime. The disciples, no doubt, were looking forward to a meal by themselves. After all, they had come expecting to be alone with Jesus, not half the population of Galilee. They knew that it would be bad form to sit themselves down among all those people and start eating so they prompted Jesus to send everyone away to find food. Jesus, we know, always did the unexpected. Instead of complimenting the disciples on their thoughtful consideration of those hungry people, he asked them to feed everyone from their small supply. Good host that he was, he invited everyone to gather round his great invisible dinner table.

Jesus said a blessing over the food that the disciples had produced, a mere five loaves and two fishes, and asked those hungry and exasperated disciples to start passing around the meager supplies. The villagers responded by sitting down in family and neighborhood groups. Perhaps some of them sat next to strangers or maybe strangers were invited into family groups. They all reached into their packs and set out what they had brought. Fires might have been started and fresh fish roasted. The lake was right there, after all. Conversation and good cheer permeated the hillside around that dinner table.

I believe that the miracle consisted in all those thousands of people acting with spontaneous generosity toward neighbors and strangers gathered around them. When the disciples reached into the basket and began handing out food, all the people spontaneously reached into their personal or family supplies and passed around whatever they had brought with them. As natural as breathing, it all was. No one hesitated. No one held back. No one hoarded. For the brief time of that meal, the reign of God was alive amid that great crowd. This was the miracle. This was the parable explaining to us recalcitrant humans that we can surprise ourselves with our own generosity and be amazed at the results.

When the meal was finished and all the leftovers were collected, I like to ponder what might have happened to those twelve baskets full of little pieces of the kingdom. I

would like to think that some was used to feed the birds of the air. Some pieces might have fed the fish or the foxes or the rabbits or the sheep or donkeys. Perhaps the disciples passed through the crowds with an invitation to “Help yourself. Take some home with you.” Perhaps people reached in to the baskets and took out enough to feed the blind man who begged on the corner or the elderly widow down the street or the leper who lived in a cave beyond the town. After that sublime meal, it would seem only natural to want to share. And, on their way to their homes as they passed through villages and shared the leftovers, did they tell those they met about a great miracle of five loaves and two fish; forgetting that the miracle had not been about food but about their own spontaneous generosity. Were their lives forever changed?

Those baskets of leftovers become for me, a symbol of the nature of compassion that nourishes both the giver and the receiver. Those crumbs of bread and pieces of fish embody empathy for another’s hunger; and thus, are transformed into a nourishing morsel of justice. In this world so torn apart by the inability of the human community to sit together at a family dinner, we need to develop a taste for crumbs of compassion and a hunger for pieces of justice. We need to train our eyes to see, our ears to hear and our voices to respond with nourishing empathy while working to satisfy the God-inspired craving for justice.

Jesus went off to a place of isolation. The crowd was there waiting for him. As much as we seek to isolate ourselves from the pain of the human community; and, indeed, the pain of nature, itself, it is there, waiting for us to notice. Christ took those loaves of bread and the fish and began passing them out. As each person took out her bread or his fish and shared what they had, the reign of God grew stronger. As each one handed a piece to another, bonds were created or strengthened. Contentedly dining in the desert, they told stories, sang familiar tunes and were freed from isolation. In the light of the fire, they began to notice a family resemblance in one another, one they could never again deny. Seeing family in one another; next door, down the street, across the world; that is the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Take, eat and share. Amen.