

Pastor Joe Polzin
Matthew 14:13-21
“Jesus Provides”

Year A – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 6, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today our text is our Gospel Reading, from Matthew chapter 14, the familiar miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. And to begin, I’ll actually draw your attention to the very end of the passage. If you notice something, after verse 21, there’s no record of what the reaction to the miracle is. No thanksgiving, no astonishment, no praise, from either the crowds or from the disciples. It’s not to say that those things didn’t happen by those people, but the Gospel-writer Matthew didn’t record it.

And when an omission like that occurs, it’s a fairly clear indication that the response is omitted for a reason. Matthew is leaving it to us, the readers or hearers of the story, to respond ourselves. So... how are we to respond? What are we to think of Jesus? Does the familiar nature of this miracle prevent us from responding appropriately? And that’s why I’d like to spend the remainder of this time talking about three things we must notice about this miracle of Jesus if we are to respond appropriately to our Savior, and to understand what God is saying to us.

And the first thing is that Jesus cares. Verse 13 begins, “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place.” What had Jesus heard? If you back up a verse, you see that the disciples of John the Baptizer had just come to Jesus, and had told him two things about his relative and friend.

First, that John had been killed disgracefully at the hands of the repugnant Herod Antipas. Second, that Herod’s attention had now settled on Jesus and the fame that had begun to surround him (14:1). Herod had even begun to assume that Jesus might be John raised from the dead, returned with miraculous power (14:2). Whatever his assumption, the attention of Herod posed a threat to Jesus’ safety, just as it did to John.

So, Jesus set out by boat into the Sea of Galilee, with his disciples, to find a place in the desert where they may be alone. He did this not in self-protection, but rather, because he knew his time had not yet come to confront the civil authorities, which inevitably would lead to his death. That time was approaching, but it had not yet come.

Still, as private as Jesus may have intended his actions to be, it didn’t work. By the time Jesus had reached the shore, a great crowd was already waiting for him. *Thousands* of people who had heard of the great works of Jesus came out from the towns. They wanted a chance to see this Jesus for themselves, and perhaps a chance to have their sick ones healed.

And instead of reacting as if this were a foil to his plans, or a burden on him, Jesus laid eyes on them and felt compassion, as he healed their sick. It’s one of those rare times in the Gospels, where we get not only a description of Jesus’ actions or movements, we also get a description of his internal emotion. And the emotion is a deep-seated pity, affection, and compassion.

We had heard of another instance back in Matthew chapter 9, not long after Jesus began his ministry, that he was healing “every disease and every affliction” (v. 35). And Matthew says, “When he saw the crowds, he had *compassion* for them [same word], because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 36). Jesus cares for his people when he

sees their great spiritual *and* physical needs. He cares for you in both your body and soul. He cares about your relationship with him, and he cares about your life right now. Jesus cares.

The second thing we take notice, which informs our response to this miracle, is that Jesus is God. And our confession of the divinity of Jesus is so foundational, but sometimes we don't stop to consider its profound importance. And it's important because, not to sound crass, if Jesus weren't God, what would it matter if he cared for us? But, Jesus *is* God. And his care for us *does* matter.

And you have to understand something. If you were a first-century Jew reading or hearing Matthew's account of the feeding of the five thousand for the first time, there would be a pretty profound theological statement building up in your mind as you went along, that, by the end, would have led you to a critical decision-point regarding the person of Jesus Christ.

You see, what was happening in Matthew's account of Jesus in Galilee was a replay of your people's history from Exodus chapter 16, where God had just freed His people from slavery in Egypt, led them across the Red Sea, and into the desert. And it was virtually no sooner that the people's feet landed on the other side, than the grumbling began. Honestly, the Red Sea was chapter 14, the grumbling about not having water was chapter 15, and the grumbling about not having food was chapter 16.

And they had the audacity to say, "I wish God would have just killed us back in Egypt, when we had enough meat and bread, instead of bringing all of us into the desert to die from hunger" (16:3).

And we think to ourselves, "Snap out of it, Israelites! You just witnessed the most amazing display of deliverance this world will ever see for a millennia and a half, all by the hand of God. Don't you think He'll take care of something as simple as water and bread?" Of course, we assume that we wouldn't, or don't, act the same way in similar situations. But they were stuck looking backwards, even longingly, toward their slavery in Egypt, when at least their bellies were full, instead of looking to the One who could provide for them everything they need.

But, God's response to this ingratitude is even more amazing. Instead of crushing them right then and there for their lack of faith, He provides for them water, having Moses throw the log into the bitter water at Marah, making it sweet to drink. And He made the manna bread to appear every morning as dew for the full forty years they were in the wilderness.

Now, fast-forward to Jesus, and here he is, healing and delivering his people from all kinds of illnesses, as the assembly is encamped by the water, located in the wilderness, and the question of food arises. Sound familiar? And the disciples, playing the part of faithless Israelites, look back toward the towns, back toward where the people had come, looking anywhere but to the One who could provide. They insist that Jesus had to get rid of the crowds, letting them fend for themselves for a bite to eat. After all, it's the only logical solution in a wilderness like this.

But Jesus responds to their faithless tirade, and proves that *he* will be the one to provide. Again, if you were a first-century Jew reading or hearing Matthew's Gospel, you would be seeing Exodus 16 replaying in your head. And in the role of God providing bread for His people, there stood Jesus. This would have been astounding. Because you were being led by faith to see Jesus as God, which is exactly what the feeding of the five thousand is all about. That Israel's God, who is incarnate in Jesus, is still feeding His people in the desert.

Which leads us to the third thing that informs our response to Jesus' miracle. Jesus cares, and Jesus is God, and now, Jesus provides. Just as God provided for the Israelites, Jesus, who *is* God, provides as well. And it's important to see the context in which they provide this physical need, providing bread for hunger. In the case of the Israelites, they were grumbling against God

Himself, and had no expectation that God would, or even could, provide. In the case of the five thousand, the disciples logically suggested Jesus get rid of the problem of the crowds, with no expectation that Jesus would, or even could, provide.

But Jesus said, “They need not go away; *you* give them something to eat.” And to show how ridiculous of a command they thought that was, the disciples, thinking they were strengthening their argument, responded, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” *C’mon Jesus, send them away already.* But what the disciples meant to be a proof that the crowds *needed* to go away, Jesus turned into proof that the person to feed them had been there all along. “Bring them here to me,” Jesus said.

And he took the bread and the fish, and as night came, Jesus took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and he gave it to his disciples, and said, “Take this to the crowds, so they may eat.” And they not only ate, but they “were satisfied.” And not only were “satisfied,” as if they had only just enough, but they were satisfied and *on top of that* there were twelve baskets of broken pieces left over.

And again, no reaction is recorded following this miracle, but it becomes pretty clear, the disciples still didn’t understand. Not one chapter later, Matthew 15, Jesus is again going to be healing beside the Sea of Galilee, when a crowd of four thousand had nothing to eat. And the disciples ask, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?” (15:33). Are you kidding me? Where have they been? How could they be so blind that they still don’t know where to turn in their time of need?

But that’s exactly the point. That’s why the Gospels don’t end with Jesus’ miracles. Jesus didn’t come only to do miracles. He came to do something for the hardness of our hearts and our complete lack of faith. His purpose was to give himself up for us in death, and to rise again, so that we would know that Jesus, who is God, cares for us, and provides for us both the physical and the spiritual deliverance that we need.

If we think that the Israelites in Exodus were foolish to doubt God, or we think the disciples in Matthew were so dense for not turning to Jesus, we must remember that their sinfulness and weakness is the same sinfulness and weakness that is within us by nature. And it is exactly the reason Jesus came among us in the first place.

We are plagued by sin, and we cannot help but fall short of God’s glory. The wages of sin is death. Our physical situation would end with the grave, and our spiritual situation would end with eternal hell. Without God’s intervention, you would have no idea where to look for provision. You would have no expectation that God would, or even could, provide for you. And if you think you would be any different than the Israelites or the disciples, then you’d be dead wrong. Literally and eternally dead.

But... your shepherd *has* come. And his name is Jesus. And just as he did for that crowd in Matthew 14, and just as he did for the whole world upon the cross, Jesus provides for you. Not because you asked for it. You couldn’t. And not because you deserve it. You can’t. He came, when you had no idea where to look for help, and your sight could only longingly look back at your old sinful ways.

But he redirected your wandering eyes, and focused them right on himself, exactly where they need to be. And you see your Savior, who took the punishment you deserved, and paid for it with his blood on the cross. He has forgiven you all your sins. And he rose again to show you that your destination is *not* the grave. It’s the new life with him that’s he’s given you now, and the resurrection he will give you on that day.

And in between now and that day when Jesus returns to bring us out from our graves to eternal glory, he does daily provide for us, because he *does* care for us physically and spiritually, in body and soul.

There may be days we are tempted to think that God isn't giving us what we need. We may grumble, or even stumble in faith, thinking we know better than God about what we need. That if it were up to us, we wouldn't have all this sin, all these challenges, all these struggles in our lives. The parts of our lives that look like failures by the world's standards. Yet, like the Israelites in the wilderness, or the crowds in Galilee, our God still feeds us in the desert of our lives. Our God provides. And we are satisfied.

In a few moments, you will see an example of His provision. In his Last Supper with his disciples, on the night when he was betrayed, Jesus once again took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and he gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat. This is my body." And in our Supper today, we will see proof that Jesus, who is God, provides us what we need, for both our body and soul. And we will forever be satisfied. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.