The Feast I Choose

A meditation on Matthew 14: 13 – 21

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His heart broken; Jesus withdrew to a deserted place by himself. Apart from the disciples. Apart from the crowds. Apart from the city.

We naturally rush to the happy part of the story: the feeding of the multitude. Of course we do! It’s joyful and hopeful and a little bit funny. It’s a vision of a way the world could be if we believed in abundance rather than scarcity. It is the reminder that God works with what we have. It is a throwback to God feeding the Israelites in the wilderness. It is an invitation to the overflowing table of God. The only miracle (other than resurrection) celebrated by all four Gospel writers. This story *matters*. It informs our mission; it shapes us and maybe even shames us a little – in a good way – to offer what little we have to God because God doesn’t see it as almost nothing. We offer back to God what came from God, and God creates a feast.

My husband likes to tell the story of growing up as a Baptist in Mississippi. His parents were faithful church goers, and most Sundays worship would end with a rousing chorus of “Just as I Am,” the salvation battle hymn of the Baptist church. On the occasional Sunday when no one was feeling guilty enough to respond to the pastor’s altar call, the singing would drag on and on, the voices growing louder to cover the murmuring rumble of empty stomachs. Eventually Lou and the other teenagers would have had enough, and someone would take one for the team, and walk down that aisle to be saved once again. The pastor was happy, the service could end and fried chicken and pot roast could be blessed and eaten. Somebody must be willing to get the party started.

In John’s gospel, we hear the added detail that a young boy was willing to share his lunch. A child who still believed in possibilities, a child who could not do the calculations and be discouraged about the futility of the gift, a child whose imagination, compassion and generosity had not been ridiculed or stifled. Thank God for the intervention of a child, a foolish, trusting child. Five loaves. Two fish: next to nothing for disciples with limited vision. Five loaves and two fish: everything to God.

The same Jesus who refused to turn stones into bread when he himself was famished in the wilderness, stood back, and allowed the people to imagine how they might participate in a miracle. He gave the disciples a task: feed the people. *They believed it to be impossible so for them it was impossible*. But mysterious things happen in the wilderness. In the wilderness, away from the noise of the city, away from the economic and political structures of the city, there is more space for wonder, for imagination, for possibility. Theologian Stanley Saunders, in his commentary on Matthew, writes, “*Just as God fed Israel in the wilderness on her way to the realization of God’s promised liberation, so now another wilderness feeding reveals a new power in the world and brings into being a new people. Unjust political, social, and economic arrangements produce scarcity, hunger, and violence, but God’s reign brings both healing and the full satisfaction of everyone’s hunger.*”[[1]](#endnote-1) The gospel writers knew the significance of this feeding story: it wasn’t simply a miraculous moment in time, but a miraculous window into God’s imagining. This was one of those moments when the distinction between heaven and earth is just a blur. A thin place, as Celtic spirituality would tell us.

Look what I did! I rushed to the miracle instead of staying with that opening line – the one about Jesus withdrawing to a deserted place. It’s almost impossible not to rush to the table when you know the meal is waiting, but we pause before we eat. We pause to give thanks and to remember. So let’s go back, and remember what has gone before. Let’s give that quiet opening line the attention it deserves. Pausing there, staying in that moment, enhances the power and significance of this miracle of abundance.

Jesus withdrew to a deserted place. The Greek word used here, *anachoreo (transliteration)*, to withdraw, appears in some other interesting places in Matthew. Remember when Jesus was just a baby and Herod I (was trying to track him down? Matthew 2:14, “So he [Joseph] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and left (anechōrēsen) for Egypt. When it is time for them to return to Israel, we encounter this same word in Matthew 2:22. Again Joseph is told to take his family, but he slightly alters the plan and they “withdraw” to Galilee, where he believes it will be safer for them.

Other examples:

Matthew 4: 12 When [Jesus] heard the disturbing yet not surprising news that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee, he *withdrew* for his own safety.

Matthew 12: 15 Having healed someone on the Sabbath, angering some of the Pharisees, Jesus *withdrew*. “Jesus knew what they intended to do to him, so he went away from there.”

In times of danger (“imperial aggression or religious opposition”[[2]](#endnote-2)), in times of fear, Jesus steps back from his public ministry.(Even before he could do this for himself, his parents stepped back for him.) Anything that happens to John is a foreshadowing of what awaits Jesus, and Jesus knows this. He knows how the world treats prophets; he knows how people respond when they hear uncomfortable truths. What has happened immediately prior to Jesus healing and feeding a multitude of people? He has just received the news that John has been executed by Herod Antipas.

It was Herod’s birthday, and his niece, Salome, danced for him, delighting him so much that he promised her anything she wanted. Salome’s mother, Herodias, told her to ask for John’s head. (John had denounced Herod – who was divorced - for marrying Herodias, who was divorced from his half-brother, a violation of Jewish law.) Faced with the choice of being humiliated in front of his wife and guests or carrying out her demand, Herod had an innocent person put to death. And Herodias used her own daughter to ensure this miscarriage of justice.

John’s disciples bury his body, and then bring the news to Jesus. How angry Jesus must have been. Angry at world that puts innocent people to death merely to save face. Angry at people that manipulate others to get what they want. Angry at people who use power to oppress, to abuse, to instill fear in others.

While we are here, let’s just acknowledge how angry Jesus still is about all these things. Angry at a world that still executes people because we have such limited understandings of justice, and such limited imagination about mercy. Jesus is still angry when we manipulate others, abuse the innocent. Jesus is still angry at those who use their power and privilege to oppress, to instill fear. Still angry. Righteously angry.

And how deeply frustrated he must have been that he could not save John. He couldn’t spare his cousin from imprisonment or execution, and he knew his own story would be the same. No one would be able to intervene on his behalf, no one would be able to spare him from imprisonment, from execution.

With all this weight on his heart, what did Jesus do? First, he healed the sick, then he hosted a party. Not in the lush halls of power, but in the wilderness. Not reclining on silk cushions but resting on God’s green grass. Roast lamb? No, just dried fish. Probably no dates or olives or pomegranates. No yeasty loaves, just simple flat bread. The most basic foods that every day, ordinary people could carry along on a journey to the wilderness to seek the face of God.

Remember what God had to say about the spiritual practice of fasting? The prophet Isaiah reminds us:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,
    to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free,
    and to break every yoke?
 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
    and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
    and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
    and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
    the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Isaiah 58: 6 – 8

Just as God has much to say about fasting, Jesus has much to say about feasting. This is the feast I choose, Jesus says: not in the halls of power but in the garden of God. The powerless are not excluded and no one is forced to do what they know is wrong, nor manipulated for someone else’s enjoyment. The world will say it is no feast at all. Shouldn’t there be seven courses? Shouldn’t there be drinks before and after? Shouldn’t there be excess? But why would you need seven courses when the only course you need, the manna of God, will sustain your soul long after the party is over?

“This is the ***feast*** I choose,” Jesus says. “Come and join the feast of God! The feast of justice and joy!”

Thanks be to the God who heals our bodies and nourishes our souls.

Let all God’s people say, “Amen.”

1. Stanley Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 144, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Anna Case Winters, Belief, *A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)