

Lectionary 18 A
The Miracle Took a Lot of Work

August 6, 2023
Matthew 14:13-21

A long time ago – about 60 years ago; in a not-so-far-away place – Portland, Oregon, I heard my parents and their church friends talk after worship services. Most often they were complaining. Their main complaint: the sermon was too long. I’ve kept that in mind over 40 years of ordained ministry – and over 2000 sermons – some were too long.

I write and usually stick to a manuscript so that I don’t ramble on and on and on and on. It also will allow Laurel, the office administrator, to post the sermons online. If there’s interest, I can also have printed copies available. I’ve done that in the past.

One son told me: “Dad, you can’t preach a sermon without referring to a Greek word.” I told him, “I found a sermon where I didn’t. So, you’re wrong.” We’ve already looked at a Greek word today. Often the Greek or Hebrew words in the original writings helps me better understand the text – and I hope it also helps you, too.

Besides Jesus, there are two groups of people in our Gospel reading: Jesus’ twelve disciples and the crowd of five thousand men, besides women and children.

There are two differences that I see between these two groups. The first is: Jesus put the disciples to work. He has them distribute the food to the huge crowd. That would take a lot of work. We could see a little of that with the children a few minutes ago.

Not only did they have to work hard to distribute the food, but the texts also says: “They took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.”¹ I suspect that since there were 12 disciples and 12 baskets, they were the ones picking up the garbage – cleaning the environment.

The second difference: they knew what Jesus did. They were aware of the miraculous feeding from five loaves and two *ichthus*. I don’t know how many of the crowd would have heard Jesus’ words or knew the limited amount of food the disciples had been given.

I could think of many ways others that Jesus could have performed the miracle that wouldn’t have required the disciples to work so hard.

Why couldn’t Jesus just make the food appear in each person’s stomach? They would have been fed. The disciples wouldn’t have to work. It would be a lot faster. There’d be no garbage to pick up. Although that might not have been too satisfying for us who like to chew and taste our food.

Jesus could have waved his hand and said the magical words, “Colonel Sanders,” and buckets of chicken could have appeared before every family. They could eat their fill and already have a place to put the bones and other garbage. Jesus could have each of them pick up their own buckets of garbage and take it with them. Make them responsible for cleaning up.

As a somewhat lazy disciple of Jesus, I like these ideas better, but that’s not what Jesus did.

This miracle begins with the disciples asking Jesus – no they didn’t ask Jesus – they **tell** Jesus. “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”² They see the need. They have a solution.

¹ Matthew 14:20

² Matthew 14:15

That is a reasonable request. Let the people be responsible for getting their own food. They are the ones who followed Jesus out into the desert place. They should have been smart enough to bring along enough food for themselves. Besides all this good logic, it would mean the disciples wouldn't have to be concerned about feeding these hungry people. They can take care of themselves.

(I've heard it said: If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans.)

Remember also that Jesus had come to this place to be alone after hearing about the execution of his cousin, John the Baptist. I'm sure that it would have been easier on Jesus to send the crowds away so that he could have been alone. That isn't what he does.

Jesus turns the request around: "They need not go away; **you** give them something to eat." In the Greek, "you" is emphasized.

That certainly wasn't the answer that the disciples had expected.

Why did Jesus do this? Perhaps it was a word that the disciples needed to hear. When Jesus sees the sick, he heals. When he sees the ignorant, he teaches. When he sees the demon-possessed, he casts out the evil spirit. When he sees his disciples, he challenges them to go to work: "You do something. You take care of these hungry people."

These disciples, like we often do, respond with inadequacies. "We don't have enough food for all these people." "It will require too much work." "It will take too long." We often have these same thoughts of being inadequate and/or not having enough resources.

They only have five small loaves of bread and two fish. Not nearly enough to feed the huge crowd. Jesus makes a miracle from their inadequate resources. He **blesses** and **breaks** the loaves of bread. He **gives** the pieces to the disciples. They **distribute** them to the crowd. In Matthew's gospel, these are exactly the same Greek words used in the Last Supper. This is a type of Holy Communion – the great crowd being fed with miraculous food from God through the work of the disciples. From the small supply, there is enough for everybody. But for everyone to share in the miracle, the disciples have to do a lot of work. Just like people need to provide the sacramental bread and wine that we will share a little later. I've seen people rush to thaw out bread or to the store to buy bread during a service. Sometimes God's miracles take human work.

Jesus is the worker of miracles. Jesus is the one who makes the miraculous happen. We can never take credit for miracles. But sometimes, like in this story, God calls upon you and me to do a lot of work so that people can share in God's miracles – even if those people aren't aware of it.

Something I want to make clear at the beginning of my time here: I am not Jesus. I am not a miracle worker. I cannot fix every problem in this congregation. Sometimes, I might even say, "That's a great idea. Why don't **you** do something about it." That sounds a bit like Jesus in this text. Working together, trusting God, we can expect to see great things.

The second thing about not being Jesus is: I will make mistakes. In anticipation of that, I ask for your forgiveness and patience as we learn to work together over the next few months.

I don't know if the crowd of thousands ever knew about the miracle that they were part of that day. They only knew that a disciple had given them what they needed – food for hungry stomachs. However, the disciples knew the power of God working through them. I'm sure that they were blessed in their work of feeding the hungry and cleaning the environment. Sometimes God's miracles take a lot of hard work, but both the disciples and the crowd were blessed through their work.

A quick memory test: What does letters of *ichthus* represent? Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior.

A brief advertisement: next week there'll be another Greek word. We'll also have a quite different look at the disciples.