

“I Have Been Fed; I Am Being Fed; I Will Be Fed”

There is only one miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels — the Feeding of the Five Thousand. This suggests that it has significance beyond the mere fact that it is a miracle. There is, in addition to this miracle, something mythic in this event.

Let me explore that term, “mythic.” Please note, I did not say “mythical” which has become synonymous with “pretend” in our vocabulary (as in that “mythical” friend you had at age five). “Mythic” goes to the heart of what it means to be human. A mythic story or happening is one that explains, or speaks to, the human condition and helps to shape and inform our common humanity. So, for example, the account of the Fall, while reporting on an actual event that happened in history, is mythic in the sense that it helps to explain the human sinful condition. We are all sinners. Why? Because Adam and Eve sinned? Only in part. More so because we all share in their human condition of disobedience, self-centeredness, and doubt. Adam and Eve’s story is our story because we also have listened to voices other than God’s; we too have wondered what it would be like to be God instead of enjoying the fellowship we have with God; we too are vulnerable when we are cut off from community. Hence, that story is mythic.

This account of the feeding of five thousand is likewise mythic. As Daniel Harrington has written: *“We all know that in order to go on living we must eat food. Eating is a necessary human action. We all enjoy the experience of eating good food, well prepared. It gives us great pleasure. We all share the desire for eating as a basic, primal, and even instinctive human activity. Eating food responds to a basic human drive, something intimately connected with our desire for survival as individuals and as a race. The fact that sharing in the Eucharist involves eating the bread of life says something important about Christianity. Far from being a philosophy or a theory, Christian faith penetrates to the most basic dimensions of human life. Far from despising the bodily aspects of human*

existence, Christian faith celebrates them. Far from dealing only with the unseen, Christian faith is tied in with the tangible and the concrete.” There is something in this story that touches us on a level that goes beyond just a fascinating retelling of something that happened “way back when.” We are somehow brought into this narrative.

Food is basic commodity that we tend to take for granted. My guess is that most of us have at home a refrigerator (at least one), perhaps a freezer (or two), cupboards, maybe a pantry. Since today is Sunday, and a goodly portion of our society does grocery shopping on Friday and/or Saturday, I feel safe in assuming that those storage units have some food in them. We get up in the morning and we do not need to ask ourselves, “*Where will I get food this day?*” We know where to get it — we go out to the kitchen. But for millions and billions of people on this planet, that question — “*Where will I get food this day?*” — has no such ready answer. For many the answer will be: “*You will not get food today; there is no food to be had.*” For many others the answer will be: “*You might get food today, but there is no guarantee for tomorrow.*” For still others, the answer comes: “*You will eat, but only if others are kind enough to bring you food.*” Those millions do not live just in the subSaharan desert, or in storm-ravaged Haiti; they live in central Cleveland and Akron, so our support for ministries like Redeemer Crisis Center is not just a “nice” thing, it is a life-saving thing. I don’t know this of a certainty, but I would hazard a guess that there may be someone who is called “St. Thomas member” who also tries to survive that struggle for food.

I don’t mean for this to be a guilt trip, so that you go home this noon and sit at the table in tears because you get to have a baloney sandwich (or something much more sumptuous) while others have nothing; but I do want you to recognize that, what we often take for granted, others cannot have at all. And God’s good grace to you is a calling to share that grace with others. Because such an awareness is mythic: it brings us all into the common human story.

Quickly review with me the account in John’s Gospel (which, I hasten to

point out, is not quite the same as the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which I hasten further to point out makes all four accounts more trustworthy as drawn from eyewitnesses).

Jesus comes across the Sea of Galilee [He does that a lot in John . . . most people walked; Jesus and the Twelve sail (or row!?) and often use that to find a way to get away]. But He can't get away. “. . . **a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick**” (this will become more important as this full story unfolds). John points out that this happened around the Jewish Feast of Passover (the festival that involved eating as its primary action).

Almost at once Jesus' humor comes to the surface (I can almost see the wry smile on His face) as He asks Philip: “**Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?**” You can almost hear Philip's brain reply: “*Whaddya mean 'We'?*” Then you do hear Philip's lips proclaim something like: “*It's can't be done! It would take more than two hundred denarii!*” [or as our translation calculates the equivalent: “*eight months' wages*” (for those of you keeping score at home, under the minimum wage that comes to just over \$11,000) — a tidy sum indeed, and not an amount one is likely to be able to get one's hands on out in the Judean wilderness]. “*Nonsense,*” says Andrew, “*I have the answer in hand. Here's a boy and his lunch. We'll make do.*” Now, he brings the lad and his lunch, but he has no idea how this will help.

Then something extraordinary happens. You probably won't think it's so extraordinary, but it truly is. Jesus said, “**Have the people sit down.**” Now what is extraordinary about that? Think about it. Why would Jesus want the people to sit down? We know . . . because we've already heard how the story turns out — but neither the Twelve nor the crowd knew that at this point. Yet both the Twelve and the crowd obey. They obey . . . they don't know fully what Jesus is going to do (although John has clued us in that Jesus already knew what He would do before He started asking Philip the question) but they are willing to trust His direction.

That is really crucial for us to comprehend. Real faith is not in being

bedazzled by the outcome of this miracle. Real faith is, in the midst of not knowing, choosing to obey. This is the real miracle in this story: That people in less than wonderful circumstances are willing to give themselves over to the direction of Jesus Christ, not knowing the outcome, but willing to venture forth on His say-so. Does that have mythic quality?

You bet. We are this crowd. This is our situation.

Anyone here want to claim that your life is perfect? (It's okay if you do, and we will celebrate with you if it is.) But I see no hands, so in some way we all acknowledge that there are places in our lives that make that life hard. Some have it harder than others, we realize. Some have it really, really hard. Some of us make it harder than it needs to be. Some will brush off whatever hardship may appear and suck it up and move on. Can we follow Jesus when those times come? Do we trust enough so that when Jesus says, "*Sit,*" we sit — even if we don't quite grasp the "why"?

This is so . . . mythic! What do we do when Jesus says "*Sit.*"? Some of us will want to know, "*What, here? There's nothing but grass here. What about some blankets, or chairs! Chairs would be nice. I'm not sitting until somebody brings me a chair. And a pillow!*" Most of us would be inclined to ask: "*Why? What's going to happen?*" A few would be led to respond: "*Now that's a stupid idea. Who thought of that? You can't get five to twenty thousand people to sit down just on your say-so. Give me a break.*" But some will just sit . . . and be wonderfully, gloriously, miraculously surprised.

This little facet of the story — hardly even worth noting on first reading (you skip right by it) — holds the key to the rest of the event. What if nobody sat down? What if, in protest, they dispersed to the hillsides? What if a riot broke out (you know what hotheads they are in that part of the world . . . it doesn't take much spark to get them exploding)? There would have been no miracle. This simple act of obedience — "***There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them.***" — makes the miracle possible.

No, their act of sitting did not cause the miracle — Jesus caused to miracle — but because they obeyed, they were in a position to receive what God wanted them to have.

How are we positioned? Are we ready to receive what God offers? Or will we insist that we will get it ourselves. When you're in your nice tidy circumstances, and you know where all the light switches are, and how to get to the fridge, and how to turn on the oven, and where in the pantry you put that box of macaroni, and water comes out of the tap whenever you turn a spigot — being self-sufficient is an attractive life choice. But in the wildernesses of life — those barren places where the normal has become abnormal, and nothing is what it appears, and there are no blankets, no chairs to sit on, no appliances, no amenities — how self-sufficient can we, will we try to, be?

St. Paul writes in today's Second Lesson: ***“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and 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.”***

Note well what Paul asks for on behalf of the Ephesians. He does not ask for anything material — He asks instead for spiritual power. Spiritual power in the inner being — a transformation from within: ***“so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”*** This is the hunger we all confront: a hunger for Christ in us; a longing ***“to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,”*** and to ***“be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”***

That begins in obedience. It begins in simple acts of surrender to Jesus' control. If this is what you want (and deep within, whether you know you do or not — that is what's mythic here: every human being longs to

become what God intends her or him to be), then you need to shut out the other voices and other sounds and listen for the voice of Jesus alone. And when He says “*Sit,*” . . . sit! You may not know why to sit . . . you may question if this is where to sit . . . you may even wonder why do I have to sit and she doesn’t have to sit? That’s okay. Sit anyhow.

Because it really comes down to this: What made it possible for the Twelve and the crowd to obey was their expectation that Jesus would, in fact, do something. Their obedience was grounded in trust. They trusted that Jesus would not ask of them the superfluous (so sitting made sense even if they did not know the whole story) AND they trusted that Jesus was about to do something more as a consequence of their obedience.

St. Paul concludes today’s lesson with this hymn of praise: “***Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.***” He celebrates — as we must celebrate — God’s power: He IS able to do more than we ask or imagine!

He is able — that far our faith can take us. Will He? That’s where faith often gets hung up. Will He? Will He feed me? Will He care for me? Will He rescue me? Will He do what I need for Him to do? He is able . . . Will He? And that’s where Satan has His field day . . . in that “No Man’s Land” of doubt between “He is able” and “Will He?”

I cannot really help you there. Oh, I can say “*Of course He will. He will!*” But then, I struggle in that wasteland with you. I, too, grapple with the “*Will He?*” I can attest from the story of my own life: “*I have been fed; I am being fed,*” and that leads me conclude: “*I will be fed.*” Which is simply a way of affirming what a lot of us know to be true: In those moments in life when I needed God to be present, I can look back and recognize His presence (I might not have recognized it in that moment, but in hindsight I see; “*I have been fed.*” Accordingly, I walk (and sit, and lie down, and stand, and run, and do all kinds of other activities) in the knowledge that God is present with me — I may not see Him clearly, but

I am assured: *“I am being fed.”* And this gives me confidence for the future: *“I will be fed.”* This is why Jacques Ellul writes, *“Hope is the same thing as remembering.”*

So here’s what I suggest for this moment: Let us put our voices together with St. Paul, and sing this hymn of praise to God: ***“to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”*** Okay, that’s a little long: *“To Him be Glory”* Try that!

If we can come to understand that He is able — that having been fed, being fed now, and to be fed in the future — if we can come to embrace that, we can sit and wait, and listen, and obey until He makes it clear what He will do. The evidence of today’s Gospel tells us: He has fed, does feed, and will feed us in an abundance we cannot even begin to conceive.

Amen.