

Now when Jesus heard this, [of the beheading of John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

As miracle stories go, the one we've heard this morning is one of the most popular. Maybe because it's about food. In any case, it's the only miracle story recounted by each Gospel writer. But they don't all tell it the same way. The numbers of those who were fed vary.

Sometimes it's 4,000. Usually it's 5,000, but for Matthew, even 5,000 was too few. For him, it's 5,000 men, "besides women and children," so who knows how many were fed? Maybe it was more than 10,000. The story seems to grow with the telling.

Along with this, Matthew doesn't just add a few details. He also leaves a few blank spots. We're not told where the loaves and fish came from. When we finally see them, they are already in the disciple's hands. And we're not told what happened to the two fish. They disappear completely. Only the bread gets blessed, broken and eaten.

But the biggest blank in the story is how five loaves of bread were broken into enough pieces to feed maybe 10,000 people with twelve basketfuls left over.

It is sometimes said that Jesus "multiplied" the bread as he broke it, but that's filling in the blank with even more mystery.

Matthew doesn't give us detailed information about this part. All we're told is that Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the bread. It's like one of those before and after pictures you see sometimes. What is different in this one from the other?

Here's five loaves, right here. Now see these baskets full of broken bread. We're not told how Jesus got from 'before' to 'after' - that's the part no one saw.

It's said that nature abhors a vacuum, and that's also true of human nature - we want so much to fill in that blank. And how we fill it in can say a lot about us. In earlier times people just assumed that Jesus was a kind of superhero who could leap tall buildings in a single bound, walk on water, and multiply loaves of bread - all in a day's work. But of course, that was back then, not now.

Through the last few centuries, rational answers have been sought. (Beginning with David Friedrich Strauss- *Life of Jesus*, 1835). We are not so comfortable with mystery (at least most of us.) I've heard of two different versions of how Jesus fed the more than 5,000. In one version, Jesus is a bit of a shopkeeper, standing in front of a cave, where his sneaky disciples keep slipping him extra loaves of bread, one after another after another. (Somehow they managed to get them there undetected.) In another version - you've probably heard this one before - lots of people brought their own food with them, but they weren't ready to share until Jesus coerced them into generosity. That's the United Way version. It comes in handy for stewardship season, too.

Either of these versions is more reasonable than Jesus simply reproducing loaf after loaf out of thin air, isn't it? But the point is not how he did it. If we're too obsessed with details, we miss the larger point.

In Jesus' time, when people told truthful stories about someone's life, they didn't fret over the details that much. You could toss things in or cut them out or even give it some imaginative flourish. What mattered was whether the story was true to character. Did it reflect something Jesus would do? More to the point, does it reflect something of God in our world in Jesus' name? If so, then it's as true a story as anybody needs.

We all make choices of interpretation, whether we realize it or not... and it's sometimes the back story- the prior story, that sets the scene and reveals a deeper truth, the reason why things happen the way they do in the first place. In this case, we already

have information in Matthew's gospel that helps us fill in some of the blanks of this miracle story of Jesus.

A power-packed sentence opens this account that is all too often dismissed as yesterdays' news, when it actually bears real impact on what happens in today's story.

Jesus hears the news of the death of his cousin John the Baptist and goes off, in a boat, to settle himself. This is no small thing. A family member has been killed, Jesus' mentor- after a fashion; the leader of a large group of followers on his own merit. Was Jesus going off to a place apart to grieve, to pray, to hide? Any of these are possibilities. So Jesus up & leaves, sad & heartbroken, returning to the hills of Galilee, the place when John himself had done the lion's share of his ministry, the place where the Spirit will tend to him once more.

And the same goes for the crowd... In the Greek text it's difficult to distinguish who the crowds were following at the time; were they John the Baptist's followers, or Jesus'? Either way, they were all grief stricken and they set on their way to sort out their future.

Imagine it like after Kennedy's assassination, or 9/11, or Hurricane Katrina. Unexpected disaster has struck and one of the leaders, a dear family member, is gone. Going back to the drawing board is the order of the day. Jesus and the people both decide to get out of Dodge. They 'hunker down' and hit the road to regather themselves. Surely they took provisions. Surely, they didn't go empty handed. But, grief stricken, they didn't set off on the trip to have a picnic on the church grounds.

Soon after their arrival, while there, Jesus saw them, opened his heart and cured their sick. That's what Jesus does. The word Matthew uses for Jesus' emotion is striking... in English its rendered 'compassion', but the Greek is much more visceral—the word is 'splanchnizomai'- a gut wrenching feeling, way down deep.

Disaster strikes, and makes even Jesus dig down deep, in himself, into that of God, for inner resources which become plenty for others.

A connection is made between Jesus' heart - gut- and holy ability to call into existence that which otherwise would not have been possible.

Somehow, the crowds are fed. More than enough food is produced to feed them all, and a miracle for the ages has been performed.

This is a treasured story, not just for those who experienced it, but for the church

through the ages. Jesus' feeding is an old, old story, but each retelling of it brings us something new. The meaning of the miracle is more than the miracle itself.

- God loves and cares for every person on earth and that the promise of life in fullness extends to all who come to the Lord...
- God calls us to be disciples, for us to be the means through which God's work is to be done in the world...
- God promises us in the Holy Spirit that the power of the love of God can sustain us through difficult times, and can help us join together in ways greater than we can imagine.

Disaster causes us to dig down deep- to feel the pain, the loss, the terror and sadness of others.

For Jesus, what that means is that he can do something about it; his followers are fed in their following. They are nourished for a new day—out of what- who knows? But it lasts long enough to make a difference and be remembered always.

Is that what happens here today in this sacrament, in the sign and seal of Christ's presence?

Will this bread and up feed us, nourish us, guide us, embolden us, uphold us, comfort us- so much that we will share with others?

With Jesus fully present here, just as he was in Galilee, indeed,
May it be so. Amen.