

“Table for 5000, Please”
9th Sunday after Pentecost - 7.25.21 - Mark 6:32-44/B

Magic. The definition is: *“the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces.”* However, if that mysterious or supernatural force is God, then it is called a **miracle**. I don’t know about you, but I believe in miracles. And I also really enjoy magic. As a kid, I had some cool magic tricks - a light bulb that needed no electricity to light up; a color-changing scarf; and a glass that water pours out of, then automatically refills. I thought about those magic tricks as I prepared today’s sermon, worried that, if I am not careful, you might think this story is just Jesus doing a divine magic trick. That his healings and his release of people from possession by evil spirits, that his works of power were simply performed to attract a crowd. But if you look closely - you will not be fooled - and you will see that underneath every one of Jesus’ miracles there is a human **hunger**. And when we take responsibility for doing God’s work with our hands, we too, are called to cast some bread upon the waters of human need, just like Jesus did.

I chose to read the Gospel from Mark today - to continue the story we have been following for weeks through the eyes of Mark, rather than switching to the appointed version from John. Because John’s perspective is all about portraying Jesus as the Son of God from beginning to end. (My NT Professor used to say *“For John, Jesus’ feet never touch the ground...”* which is understandable if the apostle John Zebedee was the author - for he had followed Jesus for three years - all the way to the cross and beyond. He knew Jesus was God.

But Mark’s Gospel was written by an unknown disciple about one life-span of approximately 35 years after Jesus returned to God. At that time, about 70 AD, Rome was crushing Judea - right down to the total destruction of the Temple. The Jesus-followers were afraid, they were being persecuted, hunted down and killed for their faith, driven literally underground. They needed to be fed on the stories of how God answers human need - the need to survive, to worship, to love, to eat, to be free.

Today’s story is one of the most familiar in the Bible. The Feeding of the 5,000 (say it with me: *“Not to mention the women and children!”*) is one of only a handful of events that appear in all four Gospels. So, we want to pay particular attention to how each writer presents it within their particular context. For Mark, the story is not really about bread at all; it is about how God provides; and about all that God needs to provide abundantly.

Question: What could **we** possibly offer to a God who responds with compassion to the needs of the world? **Answer:** Just a tiny bit of our faith. Let me say more...

Jesus had begun his ministry the same way every good rabbi or pastor spends their time: preaching, teaching and healing (we call it pastoral care.) He had not veered from that agenda since he appeared at the Jordan to be baptized by John. His disciples were not only following, but learning about God through him, and by watching his ministry. And Jesus’ reputation was growing among those who needed someone to feed their faith. Here comes our part.

At the beginning of Chapter 6, Jesus went back home to Nazareth to preach - and they couldn’t believe this was their native son, so it says, *“they took offense at him.”* He said, *“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown...and among their own tribe.”* Assuming Jesus knew our Old Testament reading from the Hebrew scriptures, he was well aware of the miraculous multiplication of loaves by the Prophet Elisha, so when Jesus calls

himself a prophet, he joins the ranks of those who have been called by God to speak truth to power. That did not go well with them, *“and he could do no deed of power there...and was amazed at their unbelief.”*

But the crowds who followed him began to speculate if he was the One they had been praying for for generations. And everyone knew someone who was in need of his healing touch. So, on this day literally thousands of people had gathered around him, hungry to hear his words, to listen to his voice, to receive nourishment and the solidarity of a crowd. The day flew by, and suddenly it was time for dinner. The disciples wanted Jesus to take a break in his teaching - or else the people would not disperse and might become “hangry.” But Jesus tells the disciple to go see how many loaves there are out there, and their report? From the thousands, ***“Five loaves, two fish.”***

Can you imagine what folks must have thought as the 12 ran through checking to see what they had brought with them? Were these guys crazy? I hope everyone else brought something, because what I have won’t help at all!” But it doesn’t say that anyone left. They were waiting. And then Jesus did something unbelievable. He ordered them to sit down in small groups and he took those 5 loaves and 2 fish and looked to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to hand out to the multitude. (Can you imagine what those in the back rows were thinking?) But at the end, the fragments filled 12 baskets - which brings to mind the 12 Tribes of Israel wandering in the desert and being fed on manna - heavenly food - daily bread provided and delivered directly by God.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUNGRY? Most people around here are not wanting for food, but are exhausted by the division, tribalization, and anger that characterizes these times. It’s pretty clear that the culture is tired of itself too, but it doesn’t seem to know quite how to escape. And that is the perfect opportunity for the church to simply be the church. Author Carey Neiuwhof says, *“An exhausted culture needs an alternative to itself, not an echo of itself. Authentic, grace-filled, hope-bearing, truthful people are what our friends and neighbors need.”*

A huge, perhaps overwhelming task. But remember what I said about God only needing our faith to provide abundantly? Dallas Jenkins, creator of *The Chosen* series about the life of Jesus, tells how he had completely washed out as a Hollywood filmmaker, and yet still felt that God wanted him to begin the project. He just couldn’t see any way to do it. An acquaintance’s post in the middle of the darkest night of his life said simply, *“It’s not your job to feed 5000; only to provide the loaves and the fish.”*

For the next three weeks we are going to be talking about BREAD - or in Church language: FAITH. I’m going to stop talking in shorthand. I’m going to be as deeply truthful as I can be as I share with you how God has changed my life and can change yours. I’m going to speak to some critical social issues as the Bible texts for the day engages them. I’m going to talk about faith: which is not just believing that there IS a God, but believing that Jesus IS who he says he IS; and that the words he spoke and the way he lived among us was God’s way of ***showing us*** a different way to be. Faith is saying YES to all of that, and then taking it to the street.

FAITH is the magic in the miracle. God doesn’t need it’s power; but God invites our participation! Just as the paralytic got up to walk, Jesus fed him, *“Your faith has made you well.”* Same with the bleeding woman of a few Sundays ago, *“Woman, great is your faith!”* It started with Jesus’ first miracle at a wedding in Cana when the hosts ran out of wine. Mother Mary told the servers, *“do whatever he tells you...”* while the disciples stood by

either glass half-full or glass half-empty people. Some believed, some were skeptical. But they saw that with God the glass is always full - almost like a magic trick where the glass never empties.

The Spirit is poured out upon us through bread to a hungry crowd. All ate and were filled. Even you. So, I ask you, *Is God feeding you in ways even you do not comprehend?* Ponder Bishop Steven Charleston's recent post to hear more about how God is nourishing you right now, in this moment: "Out praying in the summer evening. The heat comes off the ground. It holds me to the Earth. The sky turns purple. Streaks of yellow and orange stain the Western edge of the world. The air barely moves. The first stars, lazy in the heat, make a reluctant appearance, while the moon keeps watch without ever changing expression.

I feel a great sense of peace. A reassurance given without hesitation. A promise made by a heart that has never known deceit. A blessing ordained with a touch that heals. The answer to my prayer is a message for everyone. Do not be anxious or afraid. Do not feel alone or forgotten. Do not doubt or despair. The Spirit is with you. You will feel the sacred enfold you. You will be renewed in the vision that has guided you. You will discover a path you need, and the sources of your support will both surprise and comfort you. A message given and received on a still summer evening."

Faith, like bread, comes in many forms. AMEN.

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Resource:: Carey Nieuwhof podcast July 2021; Dallas Jenkins interview 2019; Steven Charleston blog 7.6.2021