

13080803 Table of Plenty, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr.
Genesis 32:22-31 and Matthew 14:13-21
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 3 August, 2008

The Gospel reading is the miracle story of Jesus' feeding the five thousand, but there were more than five thousand present. There were five thousand men, but the story ends with the parenthetical phrase, "besides women and children."¹ Jesus fed more than five thousand people. Maybe there were ten or fifteen thousand. I don't know who was counting the crowd there, but I want to make sure our ushers include all the people in a count here: men, women, and children!

This is a narrative account. Someone, perhaps a few who were present, reported what happened there that day. The story appears in all four gospels. A lot of people were fed, and they were fed with what began as a small amount: five loaves and two fish.

This is a miracle story, and miracles can happen wherever Jesus is present. From the story, we get clues about Jesus' character. "He saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."² Jesus doesn't say much in the story, only two phrases. The first is, "You give them something to eat!"³ That comes as a command to Jesus' disciples then and today. When you see someone hungry, give them something to eat.

The disciples may not have wanted to give their food away. "Hey Jesus, all we have here are five loaves and two fish. You can't feed all these people with just them."

I grew up in a home with six kids. When we were given something, it was precious. It was mine. Dad would even bring home a special vibrating marker to write our names on our toothbrushes, and Mom would sew labels with our names into our clothes so she could separate them and place them in the proper kid's drawer after she washed and dried them. "Hey! Don't touch that, it's mine!"

I'm still that way. My wife Sue grew up in a different kind of a home. Her older brothers were much older, so she was often treated as an only child. What's hers is hers, and what's mine is hers also. She'll take my coffee cup, if I don't say anything. *My coffee cup...* the one that's marked "Dan." If I don't stop her, she'll pour coffee in it and serve it to a guest!

I think we're like that, basically. We're possessive. "I packed a lunch for me. It's my lunch. Everyone else should plan ahead too. They should have packed a lunch for themselves." It's biblical. Jesus even told a parable about the ten bridesmaids.⁴ The five who were wise came prepared with flasks of extra oil for their lamps and they didn't share it with the five who were foolish.

Continuing on the theme of oil, oil company executives say, "I drilled for that oil. It's my oil, and I get to make whatever profit I can from it."

Manufacturing executives say, "It's my plant and if I can pay workers somewhere else a lower wage and make more profit, I'll close this plant down."

"Hey Jesus, all we have here are five loaves and two fish. You can't feed all these people with just them."

Jesus said, "Bring them to me."

¹Matthew 32:31

²Matthew 14:14

³Matthew 14:16

⁴Matthew 25:1-13

That's when things change. When we bring what we have and give it to Jesus, miracles happen. Jesus gets us to share, and the next thing we know, there's enough for everyone, and there are leftovers! With Jesus, the table becomes a table of plenty. It is a feast where all are fed and there are leftovers.

What was Jesus like? Here is a clue. Read what happened just before this story. The first words in our Gospel reading are, "Now when Jesus heard this..."⁵ What did he hear?

He heard of the death of John the Baptizer. John was not just Jesus' preacher, the one who baptized him. This was Jesus' cousin/leader/friend/example. John was not afraid to confront the rich and powerful, the ones who believed the rules weren't made for them, the ones who felt free to use others for their own profit and pleasure. He called such people a brood of vipers to their faces.⁶

John confronted Herod and his lover Herodias who was married to another man.⁷ Herod had John beheaded while he was in prison, and had John's head brought to the daughter of Herodias. This was the girl who danced provocatively. "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."⁸

Jesus was most probably a disciple of John's. Jesus needed to be alone. He needed to grieve. He needed to pray and meditate, and feel feelings.

He withdrew in a boat to a deserted place. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. Jesus didn't say, "Don't bother me. Go home, I need time for self care."

He didn't say, as some ministers might, "I'm on vacation, go see Peter or Bartholomew. They're covering for me"

"He had compassion for them and cured their sick"⁹ That's what Jesus is like.

That's what Jesus asks us to be like. He tells us, "You feed them!"

We come to the communion table, and Jesus feeds us, but he also shows us how to share—how to work miracles. It is a table of plenty. There is plenty for all to eat.

"This is the table of plenty. Even when we may feel excluded, Jesus invites us here. When we may feel deserted, Jesus welcomes us and prepares the meal. This is the table of plenty where the most ordinary harvest of grain and grape becomes a feast. This is the table of plenty. Come, all who hunger, come."¹⁰

⁵Matthew 14:13

⁶Matthew 3:7

⁷Matthew 14:4

⁸Matthew 14:13

⁹Matthew 14:14

¹⁰*Seasons of the Spirit* Congregational Life, Pentecost 1, 8/3/2008