

God goes over the top. Again.

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We've been reading the gospel of Mark for the last several weeks, but now we've turned to the 6th chapter of the gospel of John which we will hear in its entirety. So we transition from the lean and sparse Markan narrative to the richly embroidered version of the gospel of John (John 6:1-21).

As you probably know, this week's gospel lesson about the feeding of the five thousand is told in all four gospels. And you also might remember that there is another story of the feeding of 4,000 people told in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, but not in Luke or John. So that's six stories about the feeding of thousands of people with a few fish and loaves of bread! This is pretty amazing since no other miracle or story is told so often in the gospels. So, the fact that the feeding of the crowds occupied a major place in the oral tradition of Jesus before the gospels were written down has to mean something important. First of all, it suggests that something spectacular might really have happened, otherwise why would all four gospels mention it? Second, there is a deeper theological, allegorical meaning to these feeding stories even if you don't buy the idea that these events actually happened.

A report of a real event does not require much from us. We simply hear about it, consider the source of the story, believe that it happened or not, and move on. We decide whether we think the report is fake news or the real thing. But, whether you actually believe that any of these events really took place exactly the way they are reported in the gospels, it's the deeper meaning that I think is the most important thing here, and that's what I want to talk about very briefly today.

But before we do that I want to stick with this idea of fact versus fiction for a bit longer. Most of us heard these gospel stories for the first time when we were children and the first impression sticks with us. Children don't do allegory and deeper meaning. Children take the story simply, just as it is presented to them. And as sophisticated as we think we are as adults, it's the basic story that sticks with us, not the deeper meaning. After hearing the stories repeated so many times over many years — decades, even — I think we can tend to put our minds into neutral gear and think to ourselves, "Yup, I know this one." And when we do that we might completely miss the deeper truth.

I often think of two wise sayings about stories that have staid with me over the years. One is from my father who often said "Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story." And the other is from a venerable English professor I

know in Princeton who always reminded his students that you can only read a poem for the first time once.

So, let's try, if we can, to hear today's gospel as if we are hearing it for the very first time as adults and with our modern skepticism suspended. And let's see if we can go for deeper meaning rather than historical fact.

The stories of the feeding of the crowds offer good food for thought as we continue to ponder what we need, what we're hungry for, and what sustenance will carry us through the days of our lives, so that we may in turn participate in meeting other people at the point of their own hunger.

If we try to imagine a hillside covered with thousands of people who had just eaten all the fish and bread they could possibly eat, I think there was a lot of burping going on. A lot of loosening of belts, and lying back on the grass and people saying, "I'm glad there's no strawberry rhubarb pie because I just couldn't eat another thing!"

The point here isn't whether or not this really happened, but instead it is for us to ask ourselves "What am I hungry for?" Maybe not fish or bread. But maybe for a sense of being connected to others who are trying to understand what life is really all about. Or, if you or a family member is sick or unemployed or having some sort of trouble, maybe you're hungry for reassurance that everything is going to turn out OK or for the companionship of someone else who has been through what you're going through. Or, maybe you're hungry for a way to join with others in thanking God and praising God - for what? Family, friends, a sunny day after 5 of rain, the beautiful cloud shadows racing across the Berkshire hills, knowing that each of us is especially beloved by God no matter who we are or what we've done with our lives so far, even if we've made a mess of things.

Let's face it: We're all hungry for something. For meaning, for relationships, for love, for a chance to say thank you, for a chance to say please, for a chance to say I'm sorry. For someone to notice in us what we consider to be our most significant traits, or someone to notice in us our deepest distress. And the good news in today's Gospel is that God knows we're hungry and wants desperately to feed us, to fill us up. So, through this miracle story of Jesus feeding thousands of people with less food than would fill up one of those paper bags you get at Guido's, Jesus once again goes over the top to astonish us, to astound us with God's love for us, for God's generosity, for God's abundance. These stories of feeding thousands of people with a few fish and loaves are not so much about the act of alleviating physical hunger as it is about how God satisfies our deepest spiritual longings in the person of Jesus Christ who is the God-become-human - the God with a name and a face, the God who connects with each one of us at the deepest level of our existence. And that face is smiling at you. Always smiling the way a lover smiles at the beloved or a mother smiles at her child. **[pause]**

If the feeding of the 5000 is about satisfying our hunger — both physical and spiritual — the story of Jesus walking on water is about another basic human need: safety and security.

The disciples are in a boat on Sea of Galilee and a storm comes up. John writes: “The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.”

Is your life rough because a strong wind is blowing? If not now, can you remember a time when life did feel that way? I’ll bet every one of you can. It’s a terrifying feeling. It’s a feeling of being out of control. A feeling that you’ll go down and drown.

And that’s precisely when Jesus shows up. All of a sudden. Out of nowhere. He’s just there. Unlike other accounts of Jesus walking on water, John’s gospel does not say the storm stopped. So, the wind is still blowing and the sea is still rough and life is still a mess, but somehow we get through it because Jesus is there to go through the storm with us. And we make it to the shore and we feel secure and safe once again. Jesus doesn’t make the storm — suffering — go away; Jesus helps us endure it. We would never have made it through the storms of our lives if Jesus hadn’t come to us when we most needed him. **[pause]**

This is what Jesus is all about. This why these fantastical stories are so over the top and why they are so important. You have to take a step back from the specific details of the story of the feeding of all these people and of Jesus walking on water to see the bigger truth, the larger lesson here. These are stories about God’s love for us and about a kind of love that you just can’t find anywhere else except from God. This is what being a Christian is all about — realizing that this is what God’s up to in our lives. That Jesus wants happiness for us, not in the sense of fleeting pleasure, not in the sense of financial prosperity, but in that deep, lasting sense — true, deep, everlasting happiness and security that just won’t quit. That’s what Jesus wants for us.

And in return for this amazing gift, Jesus wants something else. He wants us to tell other people that he is the way to get satisfied. It’s not a big bank account, not things that will make us happy. Even kids know that a Happy Meal won’t really make you happy! Jesus wants us to tell others that coming here, and taking the bread of life into our hands as often as we possibly can — that will fill us up and make us feel secure in a way that nothing else can.

I know you know this. I’ve seen your faces when you come up here to take communion. I’ve seen the peace of God on your faces and the tears in your eyes when you come to take Jesus into your hands, into your hearts, into your lives. I know you know this! I know that you know that true, lasting security and fulfillment cannot be found in anything the world has to offer — even a winning lottery ticket, but only in the good things that God does for us, and the things God gives us.

Wouldn't it be something great if everyone knew about this over-the-top gift from God that is so freely available to anyone, with no strings attached?