

Congregational Church of La Jolla, UCC
Rev. Tim Seery
August 2, 2026

Matthew 14:13-18

Let us pray: God of Abundance and Multiplication: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For the last several weeks we've been hearing several of Jesus' parables—most of them agricultural in nature. But today we get a front row seat not just to his instruction but to his most profound, most well known miracles. This is where we get to see Jesus doing. This is most certainly on the greatest hits list. I think that if you were to ask someone on the street to tell you about Jesus, you'd probably get a great deal who would reference this. And like everything we talk about it sounds so simple, and it is, but it's so profound. There's so much there. This means so much. Jesus feeds people. You have to love that. Jesus feeds people and takes something that is impossibly small—like that mustard seed we talked about last week—and turns it in to something so impossibly abundant. Beyond anyone's wildest imagining. Jesus feeds the 5,000. This was a story that with central to the identity of who Jesus was thought to be—because it appears in all four Gospels. Though, in Matthew this story appears twice, as two separate events, with some minor changes—one time its 5,000 people, the next time it's 4,000 people. Very similar stories, just some minor differences. And while our tradition holds that each Gospel was written by a different writer, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, historically speaking it is more accurate and more probable that they were each written by different communities of believers spread out across the ancient near east who each had their own oral history and their own versions of stories that were circulated among them. A Matthean community, and Lukan community and so on. It's interesting that this idea of Jesus feeding people with abundance was so very essential to the Jesus of the Matthean community—the group that is responsible for the Gospel of Matthew, that they included it twice. One of the central emphases of Matthew's Gospel is the role of discipleship, of the work the church community ought to be doing in the world. And so it would seem that they were of the opinion that feeding people, and feeding them abundantly, making a way when there is no way, was the business that Jesus followers ought to pursue. Feeding people.

What I think this text ought to draw our attention to is that whoever was relaying this story throughout oral history was more concerned with context and emotion than with detail. This is interesting. Especially that last line, "The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children." Like give or take 5,000, we don't know how many women or children. 5,000 something. Matthew's account focuses on the emotional aspect of this, telling us that Jesus felt compassion for the crowd, Mark emphasizes visual setting, in that one Mark describes the way that the crowd sat in organized groups in green grass, Luke records some of Jesus' preaching to the crowd, focusing on the theological points he made, and John adds this whole other element where allegedly Jesus tests Philip asking him where they could go buy bread. But our text today is Matthew's—the text that tells us of Jesus' great compassion for these people.

But to really appreciate this profound moment in Jesus' life we have to understand the sociopolitical context. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus launches his public ministry when he hears this John the Baptizer, his mentor and teacher and friend has been arrested. John communicates with Jesus while incarcerated, Jesus clarifies his mission and in the passage that precedes this one Jesus we see Jesus sail to a deserted area alone because he's just learned that John has been executed. Herod Antipas had John executed because John condemned his unlawful marriage to his brother's former wife. He did a lot of bizarre horrible things, started a pointless war over a family feud, he was among the greediest of rulers, he used the office he held for personal enrichment. And the muscle of the empire, displayed in violence against political and social activists has been put on full display with the execution of John. And so where Jesus is at right now is he needs some time off. He is doing this profound thing and that is he is going to go to nothing. Rest as resistance. This is so contrary to the way that so many of us in our culture, myself included, are wired. Like it could be easy to think that this is the time to rally the troops, this is the time to go full force, to organize, to make some grand speech, but instead Jesus goes away to be alone. Like to just rest. Because I think at this point Jesus knows what happens to prophets. He knows what happens in this environment where those who preach a message contrary to empire, who question authority, he is seeing where that leads. Jesus tends to his own soul in solitude. There's a message for us in there. That if the Savior of the world needed rest then we do too. If the embodiment of God needed time to just chill, then none of us are the exception.

However, at this point in his ministry he's in too deep. The plan fails. The crowds pursue him, in fact they are gathering at his destination before he's even there. And they are there for a variety of reasons—they need healing, they are hungry, spiritually and probably physically, the sheer volume of human need is just so great. And you think about 5,000 people—that's a lot of people. The seating capacity of the Rady Shell is right at about 5,000 people. So imagine, you're Jesus, and the entirety of the Rady Shell, all of the people there follow you to wherever you're going to get away, to process the violent death of someone who loved, and there they come with all of their various needs and concerns. But Jesus compassion just overcomes him. You wouldn't know it from the English translation. It's so tame it says, "He had a great compassion for them.": There's a great word for this and it's: *splagchnizomai*. I think we've talked about this before, it's like a gut wrenching compassion deep in the entrails. A love so strong it makes you shake inside. That's what he felt. This text uses that word.

And then when the people with all of their various concerns grow hungry Jesus doesn't send them away, he tells the nervous disciples to bring him what they had and he took it, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and told them to distribute it. And there was enough. Not just enough but there was too much. There was an abundance. There's very strong communion imagery going on here. With Jesus taking the bread and breaking it and distributing it. And people get caught up in the logistics here—they get caught up in the part about how this worked. It doesn't say that more bread and fish just appeared out of thin air. It doesn't say that a full plate of food just materialized in front of each person. It just says that everyone ate and everyone was satisfied.

Jesus didn't instruct the disciples to go put the bread at some central distribution point and ask all the people to form a buffet line. No. The bread was distributed to each of them, very sacramental, very much like communion. The disciples go to go around to each hungry person looking again and again into hopeful and delighted eyes as they move from one hungry body to the next. Take this bread and eat. This meal in the desert is more than just sustenance it's a feast. It's a banquet. And I think it has to be seen as a banquet that stands in complete contrast to the banquet that Herod Antipas held earlier where in his drunken state Herod's wife convinced their daughter to request from her father the head of John the Baptist. That was a banquet too. But a completely different one. And Jesus is so smart, he's a man of contrast—the empire does something—he doesn't do the exact same thing but in the completely opposite manner.

You have to understand another thing too—food shortages were a big part of life in ancient Galilee. And so Roman officials would use grain give-a-ways as a political tool to curry favor among the people. Jesus knew the power this held. So people being fed in a far away desolate place, by an entity that wasn't the empire, was a fantastic PR move. Someone who could feed the masses, especially those on the peripheries of the empire, this showed the people that the Romans weren't the only game in town. That this guy named Jesus could give hope, could provide sustenance, could do something in an entirely different way.

Especially on a day such as today when we celebrate communion, the communion imagery of this story stands out to me. A lot of us go into this work because of that. Because it's just so amazing. It's so simple, yet so profound. I much prefer it when you all come forward to be given communion because it just feels so much more personal to me than serving you at your seats. I get to give each of you bread. And look at each of you, and say your names. People often ask what the best part of the clergy job is and it's that. It's that you get to stand at a table that stands in solidarity with justice and that stands against all of the divisions and exclusions of empire and of this world and you get to proclaim that all are beloved. Like that's incredible. If any of you ever want to experience it, tell me, and I will have you be a communion server. I've served communion in the pitch black darkness of a graduate student center using Doritos and water, I've served communion in hospital rooms when the grief hung so heavy, I've served communion outside of correctional facilities where immigrants were being detained. I've served communion at Old South Church during its Jazz Service while as people came forward a string bass strummed ever so gently in the background. There is so much we can do with communion. It's a blank canvas for creativity and let me tell you I have lots of ideas for us as we enter this next iteration of what church is going to look like in these next five years. Because in a church where we proclaim every week where God is our only King, and making a nation great means kindness is restored, taking communion is an act of resistance. Because it says to this world that no matter what laws are passed, what executive orders are signed, none of those have the power to stop us from constructing a table where every single person is invited to bring their whole and entire selves.

There's actually this really well known book called "Take this Bread and Eat" by Sara Miles. Sara happened to stumble upon St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco one Sunday and she went in and stayed for the service and took communion and she found herself coming back, week after week, —like all of you did here, you come back week after week and she was perplexed, and addicted to this idea of communion. It propelled her to start one of the

biggest food pantries in San Francisco that she writes about in this book. But in one passage I like she says this, “The faith I was finding was jagged and more difficult. It wasn’t about abstract theological debates. It was about action. Taste and see, the Bible said, and I did. I was tasting a connection between Communion and food—between my burgeoning religion and my real life. My first year at church ended with a question whose urgency would propel me into work I’d never imagined: Now that you’ve taken the bread, what are you going to do? Filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized I was meant to feed people. And so I did. I took Communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I’d experienced. I started a food pantry and literally gave away tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I’d first received the body of Christ. I organized new pantries all over my city to provide hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week. Without committees or meetings or even an official telephone number, I recruited scores of volunteers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

This is the best real world example I can possibly find for you of the loaves and fishes story. Looking for rest, looking for respite, looking for a break, Sara walked into an Episcopal Church needing a break, and what she encountered there around the communion table was an awareness of a world of throngs of hungry people. Like Jesus she came looking for solitude and she found that but with that she found a call to action. She felt that gut wrenching compassion of Jesus deep within her. She came looking for solitude and rest and she left prepared for action. And that’s sort of what happens in spaces like this. She found a way to make a banquet that didn’t require pre-qualification, that didn’t require membership, that didn’t require one to pay a tab, she constructed a banquet that centered around nothing but radical grace. That’s exactly what this story is about.

This story was actually a favorite of Pope Francis who said this “Jesus does not perform a magic trick; he does not change five loaves into five thousand and then announce: ‘There! Distribute them!’” No, says Francis. “Jesus first prays, then blesses the five loaves and begins to break them, trusting in God. And those five loaves never run out. This is no magic trick; it is an act of trust in God.”

Friends as we enter this new era of church. As we continue to build tables of radical inclusion. As we continue to do this strange and peculiar thing where we take bread and juice and we proclaim it as an act of resistance to all of those things that seek to squelch us, may we understand that part of that is that we trust, we trust in what is next for us is abundant, is more than we need, is beautiful and is blessed. That we will call more and more people to this table, and we will look all of them in their eyes, hungry and looking for rest, and we will bless them, affirm them, love them, and make a space for them. And there will be room for everyone.

May it be so.

Amen.