

Loaves and Fish

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The logo for AETH (Association for Ethical Theology) features a stylized, multi-colored triangle (yellow, orange, red, purple) above the word "AETH" in a light grey, sans-serif font.

AETH

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Now when Jesus heard this, 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 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. Matthew 14:13-21 (NRSV)

The text we have just heard is one of several that speak of a multiplication of loaves and fishes, whereby Jesus feeds a multitude. When we read one of these texts, we usually bring to mind all that we have heard in all of them, and somehow create a composite story which does not quite agree with any of the texts. For instance, we have heard so many sermons about the boy who offered what little he had that few of us notice that in this particular story there is no little boy. This is one more example of something that we often do with Scripture without even knowing that we are doing it: we take for granted that we know what it says and hear it paying little attention to detail, while putting into it all sorts of other things that we expect to be there. In any case, let us look at today's text as if we had never heard it before.

Jesus has just heard of the death of John the Baptist, and he goes apart to a lonely place, perhaps seeking solitude in his grief, or perhaps because what has happened to John is an indication of what will happen to him. But he will not be allowed such solitude for the moment people hear where he is going they flock to him, to the point that when he reaches the shore there is already a throng there waiting for him. And the text tells us that he felt compassion for them and healed their sick.

But that is not enough. It is never enough. We do not know why they stayed but stay they did. Perhaps they were just grateful and did not wish to leave the one who had healed their sick. Or perhaps they were curious and were waiting around to see what he would do next. Or perhaps they thought that the one who had healed their sick could do still more for them.

In any case, it grows late and there is no food. The disciples grow restless. Perhaps at first the crowd was an honor, and the disciples were thrilled to see their master perform miracles. But now the crowd has become a nuisance. It is time to eat, and they won't leave. There is not enough by a long shot to feed them.

We all know the feeling. We have company. It grows late. We set the table hoping they will leave. They are still there. We bang the dishes and rattle the silverware, but apparently, they

cannot hear. It is well past our dinner time and the guests who were welcome three hours ago still will not go and are no longer as welcome.

So, the disciples look around. It is getting dark. It is time to eat. They had brought enough for themselves: five loaves and two fishes. “Master, this is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

Again, we all know the feeling. We are living in a world where there is all around us a vast throng of people in need. There are people who do not have enough to eat, not only in Ethiopia and Mozambique, but much closer to home. There are people, especially children and the elderly, to whom no one pays much attention and who more than anything need love. There are people who have come to this country fleeing either poverty or oppression, and who even here are still oppressed by poverty, As Christians and as decent folk we feel that we ought to do something for them. So, we invite them to church in order to preach to them. Or we gather an offering like the one that will be collected today for the poor so as to have something to give to those who are in most urgent need. But that is not enough. The multitude will not go away. The need is always there, demanding more time, more attention, more money, more resources.

And then we look at this text and we wish it were as simple as that. We wish that somehow, we could bless our offering, and it would multiply and feed the hungry in Mozambique and house

the homeless in Dallas. But it just doesn't happen that way. And so, like the disciples in our text, we say, Lord, send them away, take them away from our field of vision. We only have so much, and it is not nearly enough. If you are not going to give us a happy ending like in your Gospel text, please do not make us part of the story.

But the fact of the matter is that in the Gospel itself there is no such happy ending, or rather, the happy ending does not come as easily as that. For the story does not end where we stopped reading. The story continues. Jesus feeds the multitude, and they still need more. And they go away for a time but then they return, and they follow him. And they ask for miracles. And sometimes there are miracles and sometimes there are not. And eventually one day, as he enters Jerusalem, they ask him to be their king, to run the city, to restore the kingdom of David. And when he will not, they demand that he be crucified. In the end, he gave his all, his own body and blood, for that same multitude for whom he had compassion, even for us.

You see, this Gospel text is not an isolated Bible story that we can take as an episode in the life of Jesus, apart from that entire life and what it means. The life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, are the opening of a new age, the dawning of a new hope. There are many references in Scripture to the day when the Kingdom of God will come, and among the many signs of that Kingdom are that all people will be made whole and that there shall be abundance and justice, so that none shall go hungry. Thus, when on that lake shore in Palestine Jesus had

compassion on the multitude and healed their sick and then fed their hunger, he was doing much more than that. He was giving them and us a glimpse into the coming Kingdom that He has promised. And, when this and other such glimpses led to his death, he also showed us that precisely because his kingdom is not of this world, its citizens and followers will not have an easy time of it in the present order. And so, he died, not in spite of having healed the sick and fed the multitudes, but precisely because he healed the sick and fed the multitudes.

It is true that the story has a happy ending for after the cross came the resurrection. But it is not a cheap happy ending. The ending is not simply that Jesus fed the multitude, and they went away happy. The end, or rather the beginning of the end, took place in Gethsemani and on Calvary and at the empty tomb.

I say, "the beginning of the end," for in truth the story has not ended. Still the throngs are in need. Still there is hunger in Mozambique and pain in Dallas. Still, we wish they would go away. Still, as Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom by healing the sick and feeding the hungry, we are called to announce the same Kingdom by again healing the sick, visiting the lonely, clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. Still, as on that lake shore many centuries ago, we often feel we barely have enough for ourselves. And still Jesus says about what we have, about our all, "bring them to me." Little though it may seem, even if it is not more than a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, I will turn them into a sign of the Kingdom, just as one night, when

there were no multitudes around, but when the power of evil were closing around me, on the night I was betrayed, I took bread, and blessed it, and with that bread have the ages been nourished; and I took the cup and blessed it, and with that cup have the ages quenched their thirst.

Yes, he says around you is a world in need. To that world I send you. It will not be easy. You may even have to give all that you have and even all that you are, your own body and blood. But fear not, for this is my body which is broken for you, and this is my blood, which is shed for you. And it is precisely because you share in this body of mine, because you have become my body, that I offer you to the world, pronouncing over you the words that I spoke also over the bread, “take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you”

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