“Expanding the Table Until There is Enough for All” - Rev. Dr. Adam Hange

Meditation on Matthew 14:13-21, the Feeding of the Five Thousand

Take a breath in. And let it out slow… We come to the table today the way people always have… hungry. Not always hungry for bread. Sometimes hungry for enough. Enough time. Enough rest. Enough assurance that we won't be forgotten when the benefits run short… and the shelves run thin.

In today’s reading, Jesus has just heard that John the Baptist has been killed — executed, Matthew tells us, as the entertainment at a lavish banquet Herod threw for his own birthday. Grief-struck, maybe afraid, Jesus gets in a boat - and goes to a “deserted place.” He wants to be alone. But the crowds find him anyway, thousands of people, walking the shoreline, following him on foot because they, too, are hungry for something. Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw them, grief and all, he was moved with compassion. He set aside his need for solitude, and attended to those who needed healing.

As the day begins to draw to a close, the disciples start to get practical, the way tired people do. “Send them away, they say. Let them go buy food for themselves. There's not enough here.” Jesus answers: *"They need not go away. You give them something to eat…”* The disciples check the inventory. Five loaves. Two fish. Jesus doesn't argue with the scarcity. He takes what's there — takes it, blesses it, breaks it, gives it — and there is enough. More than enough. Twelve baskets left over. One for each of the disciples, to remind them of Love’s abundant blessings.

Taken by itself, this story is a wonderful miracle of God’s provision. But notice what Matthew has done by placing these two stories side by side. Just before this, we watched King Herod's banquet: a closed room, invitation only, with entertainment paid for through someone’s execution. Now, we arrive at an open hillside, no guest list, no cover charge, a meal thrown together from a kid’s lunch, and the willingness of everyone present sharing whatever they had to share. It’s easy to make this story about the miraculous. In fact, I think it’s more subversive. Why? Because bread has always been political.

Remember when Parisians cried out for bread, Marie Antoinette famously said, *“If there’s no bread, let them eat cake!”* Al Capone, an infamous gangster, ran a soup kitchen through the Great Depression.

And the Roman emperors of Jesus' own day handed out free grain to keep the peace, famously offered "bread and circuses," while their armies and tax collectors were busy consolidating the very farmland that grain came from into the hands of a wealthy few, and pushing Galilean peasants and fishers off the land and water that had fed them for generations. The "gift" and the theft came from the same hand.

So when Jesus feeds a hungry crowd on a hillside instead of sending them back toward the market towns, that isn't only tenderness. It's a claim: this food, this land, this abundance belongs to the Creator, and to the people who labor for it, not to whoever controls the dole. It's less a miracle performed *for* the crowd than a truth enacted *with* them.

That distinction still matters when we talk about SNAP, or unemployment insurance, or any benefit handed out by the same systems that helped create the need for it in the first place. We're often told to feel grateful for scraps of a safety net, as though it were charity and not simple justice. Jesus doesn't ask the crowd to be grateful. He just feeds them.

There is something which is all-too easy to miss about the wilderness where this happened: it wasn't neutral ground. Palestine under Roman occupation was heavily taxed, its fish and produce largely shipped off to feed cities and elites elsewhere, while the people who caught the fish and grew the grain went hungry. Food justice organizers today have a name for that pattern when it shows up in our own country: food apartheid - a term coined by Karen Washington to describe how systemic racism, redlining, and generations of unequal policy have concentrated hunger in Black and Brown communities, not by accident, but by design.

One writer has described this hillside meal as something like a pop-up kitchen in a food desert. Here’s what I find most revealing. Nobody in that crowd had to fill

out a form. Nobody had to prove they were poor enough, or looking for work, or worthy. They were just fed…. That's the same spirit behind the liberation fridge and pantry on East Main St — no questions, no proof, no hoops. Take what you need, leave what you can. It's the spirit behind a food pantry that doesn't make people beg, a sack lunch handed to a kid without asking if or why they are hungry. When we build things that way, we're not practicing kindness. We're enacting justice.

Jesus went looking for solitude that day and didn't get it. He was grieving. He may have been afraid for his own life, now that Herod had shown what happens to prophets who trouble the empire. And the crowd found him anyway, needing him anyway. Scripture tells us he felt compassion. It doesn't say the compassion was uncomplicated. We can feel the weight of grief and generosity simultaneously.

The wilderness, all through scripture, is where people go to remember they're free — free from the noise of empire, free to hear something truer than what the centers of power are selling. Jesus didn't get his solitude that day. What he got instead was a chance to practice, in public, a different kind of belonging — not top-down charity handed from on high, but something closer to mutual aid among people who all showed up hungry, including him…

What would it mean for congregations like ours, all over the country, to become a deserted place like that? Not an escape from the world, but a crack in it, a place where people can be honest about their hunger and their grief at the same time, and be fed anyway?

Here is my invitation to you, to me, to us today… when you come forward for bread and cup in a few minutes, do not see just this table, but also remember every other table this church sets — the pantry shelf, the fridge on the corner, the sack lunches packed for kids who'll need something before the school day even starts.

It’s all the same table. It's all five loaves and two fish, handed over before anyone was sure it would be enough — and it always, somehow, is. Not because scarcity isn't real, but because it doesn't get the last word here…

May we leave this place unwilling to send anyone away hungry. May we be as suspicious as Jesus was of bread that comes with strings attached, and as generous as that hillside crowd who discovered, loaf by broken loaf, that what they had was always meant to be shared. May it be so…

Notes:

This sermon was inspired and informed by enfleshed.com's “Liturgy That Matters” commentary on Matthew 14:13-21 (August 6, 2023), and Anna Blaedel's "Bread and blessing, still"