

Filled in the Kingdom of Heaven: Matthew 14:13-21

It is no secret that our world has a global hunger problem. Over 870 million people in the world are hungry, and the vast majority of them live in developing countries. Poor nutrition accounts for nearly half of the deaths in children, and many of these children began life undernourished because the mother was undernourished.

It's also no secret that the world produces enough food to feed everyone. So, why do we have so many hungry people?

Obviously, this is a complex issue, with layer upon layer of cause and effect and contributing factors. But essentially, we have an accessibility problem. The people who need food simply don't have access to it: access to good agricultural land, economic access, educational access, or geographical access.

In the first century, food scarcity was just as rampant as it is today. The crowds that we meet in Matthew's gospel were also hungry. They were poor. They too had accessibility problems: had little access to fruitful crops or money to buy land or food. It wasn't a big stretch for them to leave their homes and follow Jesus around the countryside, much of it dry, deserted and wild. They didn't have anything to lose.

Imagine for a moment the scene Matthew recounts. The air is hot and dry and dusty. The sun beats down with an oppressive kind of heat, and there is no shade to escape it. The ground produces only a few thistly bushes with no fruit. There is little fresh water save for what people have brought with them. And gathered in that inhospitable place are close to 10 000 people (5000 men + women and children). They are all pressing in like a mob at a rock concert. Everyone wants to see Jesus, touch him, be healed by him.

Into this gathering God appears. Into this gathering Jesus shares his presence, a presence which reflects the compassion and care that God has for the vulnerable.

Often times when we study this passage, we focus on the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. But for the God who created the universe out of nothing, multiplying some food wasn't a major accomplishment. And Jesus wasn't the only one around who was working miracles, or the only one people hailed as the messiah, or even the only one who claimed to be the Son of God. After all, most of the Roman emperors did that much.

What set Jesus apart from these other imposters was that the wonders he performed were always signs of the character of God whose presence Jesus embodies. In the first century, the gods were hardly the types to show compassion on the people. Most of the time, the people believed that the gods were using them as playthings, or ordering them around to appease their desires. And almost all of the time, the gods were on the side of the rich and powerful, not the poor and hungry.

The wonders Jesus performed were never designed to draw attention to himself, but to his Father: the love, grace, and compassion of his Father. Jesus renews, fulfills, and embodies the call of the God of Israel to feed the hungry. We are told in this passage that the reason Jesus worked among them was because he had compassion on them. The biblical witness is clear that the God of Israel is a God who

feeds his people. This story echoes many found throughout the Older Testament: The miracles of Elijah in multiplying the meal and oil for the widow of Zarepath (1 Kings 17:10-16), Elisha multiplying the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1-7), the provision of manna and quail in the wilderness. When the bible talks about the "Day of the Lord", that day when God's kingdom will be finally consummated, food and feasts are always mentioned – there will be abundant food for all (Ps 107:9; Isa 25:6-10; 55:1,2; Ezek. 39:40; Rev. 7:16;). And of course, we are all familiar with Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, when Jesus promises that all who drink from the well of life that he provides will never thirst again.

The story about the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is about much more than simply increasing some food. It is about the continuation of God's covenant promises made to the Israelites centuries earlier. It is about remembering God's loving and just character. It is about the way that Jesus shares God's presence with the poor and hungry in a dry and deserted place. It is about the way that Jesus rights social injustice by leveling the accessibility ground and by showing care and compassion on the powerless of society.

And it is about how Jesus uses inadequate and reluctant people to do this.

When the disciples approach Jesus, their comments are almost insulting to the crowds. "It's late, there isn't anything here to eat. Send them all away to find some food."

Where on earth were they going to find some food? There wasn't anything readily at hand: no fruit trees to pick, no grain to glean. They were poor and didn't have the means to travel to the nearest village to buy some food. Here was a group of people who had been following Jesus around for weeks or months, watching him perform miracles beyond the realm of human understanding, befriending the poor, downtrodden and vulnerable everywhere he went, and the disciples have the nerve to suggest that Jesus ignore the basic needs of this crowd and send them away hungry.

Jesus' response? "You do it."

"Don't be ridiculous", they protest, "we only have a little bread and fish. How can we possibly feed all these people."

"You do it."

I wonder if the most remarkable thing about this passage isn't in the way Jesus multiplies the food, but that he enables and empowers the disciples to do his will, despite their reluctance and despite their meager resources.

This story speaks to us about what it means to be Jesus' disciples where there is profound lack, and to still experience provision. It's about what happens when we think we can't go on and the odds are against us, but we persevere anyway through the blessing and abundant power of God.

Discipleship is rarely convenient. Often times our discipleship is tested in deserted places, when it's getting late, and when we think we are finished.

Most, if not all the time, discipleship is rooted in inadequacy. The disciples felt inadequate for the task that Jesus had given them. They focused on the scarcity of the situation: “we have nothing but 5 loaves and 2 fishes.”

But Jesus responds with blessing and abundance. The kind of blessing and abundance that only God can offer.

In Jesus, God’s will that all people would be filled and satisfied in his presence is fulfilled. As Jesus *blessed* the food, *broke* the food, *gave* it to the disciples to distribute, all *ate* and were satisfied. I think Matthew wants us to be looking ahead to the Last Supper, when Jesus repeats those words as he prepares his disciples to carry on his ministry after his death and resurrection. With these words and the actions that follow, Jesus enacts and fulfills the covenant promises that God had made to his people all those centuries ago: to be their God and to claim them as his chosen and beloved children, wanting for nothing in the goodness of his Kingdom.

And the real miracle is that Jesus invites the disciples to share in fulfilling those covenant promises. When they respond, the crowds are filled and fulfilled, economic inequality was leveled, and the poor and vulnerable found themselves being treated as the members of God’s family that they already were.

This miracle continues whenever Jesus’ disciples give themselves up to respond to the call of Jesus to participate in fulfilling God’s covenant: whenever Jesus’ disciples give up status and power to serve the poor, downtrodden, disadvantaged. It continues whenever parents put their own dreams career and success aside to care for a special needs child. It happens whenever a young university graduate puts aside a high paying job to teach disadvantaged kids. It happens whenever a retired person puts aside their well earned retirement to work toward social justice for the nameless and voiceless people who are ignored because they hold no power. It happens whenever a struggling church makes a promise that no one who comes through its doors will ever be turned away hungry.

God is still performing miracles through disciples who are eager and through those who are reluctant, and through all kinds in between. The real wonder of this story is that it continues. God still cares deeply and compassionately for the vulnerable, and he continues to use his disciples to do His will.

When we look at the appalling statistics of people who are hungry every day, people who suffer injustice every day, children who go to school without adequate nutrition every day, we might be tempted to wonder why there is no much hunger in this world given the vast resources that we have. Perhaps Jesus is saying to us, “you do it.”

The church often asks itself the question of how to be obedient in the face of limited resources or in the depths of seemingly deserted places. But when it comes to Jesus, we would be wise not to underestimate the blessing and abundance of God. God always provides out of his abundant, compassionate, gracious, love so that His will is done. And we would be wise not to count ourselves out of the picture, for Jesus says to each one of us, “You do it.” “Let my will be done in you so that all may be filled and fulfilled in my kingdom”.