

**Sermon** August 6, 2023  
[Matthew 14:13-21]

*Feed the 5,000*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace this morning and peace to you, from God the Creator and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Healer, the Christ, and the Compassionate One. Amen.

Today's message is offered in a spirit of light-heartedness. So, what I mean by that is, I hope you laugh at my jokes!

The title of our message is "Feed the 5,000."

In life, there are many big questions, questions that have perplexed and fascinated the philosophical mind for centuries.

Who or what is God?

Does God exist?

How did the world come into being?

Where do babies come from? (One laugh, that's great. We'll start there and build...)

And most importantly, *most importantly,*

What does a pastor actually do, when he's not preaching or leading worship on Sunday morning?

Now the answer to this question depends on the pastor's call. In my case, for instance, much of my work as pastor that's in an educated, affluent, urban congregation involves writing. This includes everything from forum descriptions and titles to monthly reports, yearly reports, synodical reports, and of course, your favorite and mine – stewardship letters.

I also do a lot of instructing, not just leading forums or Bible study, but training acolytes, assisting ministers, leading confirmation, teaching first communion classes, and providing, as I did recently, baptismal instruction.

I also do weddings and funerals.

I bless homes, and I regularly engage, as I did yesterday, in pastoral care. Yet of all the tasks I do, of all of them, the one thing that I like most is taking communion to the homebound – which brings me to a story I'd like to share with you today.

Recently, I was visiting one of the matriarchs of the congregation at her assisted living facility here in Seattle. After we talked for a while, we began the rite of Holy Communion. We started with the Apostolic Greeting, just as we do at the beginning of the service, taken from the letters of Paul: "The grace of Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you." That greeting, as you may

recall from a sermon I gave some months back, is meant to establish a relationship between the presider and the parishioners. So, we began with the Apostolic Greeting.

We continued with the Words of Institution, which as you know, are the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. "This is my body, given for you." (In Latin what you may not know is that the phrase is "*Hoc est corpus meum*," which is where skeptics and critics got the abbreviated form "hocus pocus" to describe what they understood to be the Roman Catholic teaching of transubstantiation.)

After the Words of Institution, we continued with the Lord's Prayer, just as we do here in the service. And finally, finally, we received the bread and the wine. I use the communion kit that was given to be my family of my pastor from growing up.

We receive the bread and the wine and then as we do in a service, I offered what we call our Post-Communion Prayer. So: Apostolic Reading, Words of Institution, Lord's Prayer, receiving of the bread and the wine, and the Post-Communion Prayer.

Now because as a pastor, I am reckless and wild; because I live on the edge, you might say, of the pulpit, and because, to quote the great British comedian Rowan Atkinson, "I laugh at danger. I tweak the nose of terror, and I drop ice cubes down the vest of fear," I decided to change a few words in the Post-Communion Prayer.

(I also stay up past 9 pm which is very, very radical!)

In a moment, I'm going to tell you what those words were, and what I changed. But first, I want to talk with you about Matthew 14, our Gospel reading for today. And the reason I do so is to show you how this passage informed the radical change I made at the end of the communion rite. What I love about this passage is the compassion Jesus shows for people. Take a look at verse 14, if you will, when he went ashore.

So, he's on a mission; when he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and you might say he let himself be diverted. The text tells us "and he had compassion for them and cured their sick." Again, verse 14: "He had compassion for them." Some translations say "he was moved by pity."

"He had compassion for them, and cured the sick."

Now this verse is easy, very easy for modern skeptics to dismiss. Here, they might say, we have another example of Jesus the Magician, Jesus the Wonderworker, Jesus the Exorcist, Jesus the Doer-of-Fancy-Tricks. But that reading of this passage, I submit, is a mistranslation, or rather a misleading translation, as I said recently, in a cleverly-written stewardship letter.

Take the word "cure," for example. That's again in verse 14. It comes from the Greek word *therapón*, which in English becomes the word "therapy." A therapist does not technically cure a disease. She heals people by restoring them to wholeness, in part by mediating the power of acceptance, or what we traditionally call grace.

Accordingly, we can translate the passage as follows: “When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them, and he made them whole.”

He made them whole.

I find this translation to be especially important for those of us, all of us, perhaps, who have suffered deep loss. The point here is not simply to cure a physical disease. It’s to make the person right again with her God, with her community, with herself and with creation.

The same is true when it comes to feeding the 5,000. The Biblical literalists have long defended the story as proof that Jesus was the Son of God. Why? Because, unlike the prophet Elisha, who came before Jesus and fed 100 people with 20 loaves of bread, *Jesus* feeds over 5,000 people with nearly five loaves of bread. Tada! What a miracle!

But I think at a deeper level, there is a much greater miracle happening here. A miracle consistent with the kingdom of God Jesus is manifesting. 5000 people, led by the Spirit of Jesus, and the compassion he demonstrates toward them, share what they have, and no one goes hungry – or as the passage concludes, “And all ate and were filled. And they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, 12 baskets full.”

That’s the greatest miracle of [Matthew] 14, our Gospel reading for today, the true miracle of today’s story, namely, the act of sharing – an act, if we wish to use traditional language, that fundamentally goes against our sin-nature, or an act, if we wish to use contemporary evolutionary biology, an act that goes against our self-interest with regard to survival.

Now, I invite you to listen to my version of the Post-Communion Prayer I discussed a moment ago. The original goes like this:

We give you thanks, Almighty God,  
that you have refreshed us through the healing power of this gift of life,  
and we pray that in your mercy you would strengthen us through this gift  
in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another  
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

That’s the language of the original rite. I want you to notice especially this talk of “the gift of life” and again, “through this gift”,

Here, based on Matthew 14, our Gospel reading for today, is what I, your radical, revolutionary rebellious pastor changed:

We give you thanks, Almighty God,  
that you have refreshed us through the healing power of this act of sharing,  
–You hear that? “Through the healing power of *this act of sharing* –”  
and we pray that in your mercy you would strengthen us  
through *this act of sharing*

in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another  
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

The ancient Greek way of thinking is to focus on *things* – in this case, the bread and the wine of Holy Communion – as somehow imbued with the presence of God in Christ. The Hebrew way of thinking, however, is to think in terms of *relationship and actions*. So, in this case, the sacramental activity is not simply the bread and the wine. It's the *act of sharing* that we undergo in the process of celebrating Holy Communion.

This morning, I invite you, then, with the person I visited, to experience communion differently. Instead of focusing on the bread and wine, I invite you to focus on this holy act of sharing we practice. Inspired by compassion, it's the act of sharing, the miracle of sharing, that continues the work of the kingdom Jesus began.

We rehearse this act in worship – which is why you need to be, as you are, here today – thanks be to God – in worship. We rehearse this act in worship, so that we can live it out in the world beyond these walls. But as is the case with going to the gym or not going to the gym, you'll be stronger if you go to the gym! So, we rehearse this act in worship, such that we can live it out in the world beyond these walls.

The message here, in short, is this:

Share what you have – as many of you are already doing.

Give to the less fortunate – as many of you are already doing.

Be Christ to your neighbor – that, my friends is the true miracle of today's story, the miracle we rehearse every Sunday, when, to quote our Distribution Hymn, we "Break Bread Together on Our Knees."

Yes, in life, there are many big questions, yet perhaps the most important one, we answer today:

How should I live a Christian life? or

How shall I live my life the way God intended?

The answer?

Feed the 5,000 in your daily walk with Christ.

Share what you have with others, so that no one goes hungry.

And all God's people said, "Amen."