

## *Stewardship of Bread*

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Matthew 14: 13 - 21

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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 the 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, *New Revised Standard Version*

### I.

The circumstances are clear.

These people are in a deserted place.

They are people who are weary and hungry.

They have come on foot from their respective villages.

They've stayed all day and have few resources.

These are people experiencing food insecurity and they lack adequate health care.

Jesus has spent the day seeing and touching and healing them, people of all ages.

And now it is evening. It is late. It is time for a meal.

The disciples bring a plan to Jesus: "Send them away to go buy food for themselves."

But they are a huge crowd and their villages are far away.

And the work of healing and community-building is not yet done.

If Jesus considers the disciples' idea, the text doesn't say so.

"You give them something to eat," he says.

A Brooklyn pastor, Rev. Gary Simpson, pondered this scripture in light of the ministry of womanist scholar and preacher Prathia Hall.<sup>1</sup>

Prathia said she was formed by what her preacher father called "freedom faith."

Freedom faith asserts that God wants people to be free.  
And God provides enough resources to empower those who want to be free.  
Rev. Simpson says that "Freedom Faith" is discernible in this text.  
In that deserted place, God wants people to be free.  
And God works through Jesus to provide that freedom.  
And Jesus looks at the situation and provides resources to empower those who want to be free.  
And he starts with the disciples.  
"You give them something to eat," he tells them.  
You don't need to send them away.  
You have in your possession everything necessary to feed the people.  
Have I mentioned yet that they were in a desolate place?  
Have I uttered the detail about what hour it was?  
Have I suggested that the crowd might be rather large?  
All that being true, the disciples did not fixate on what they did not have.  
They took stock of what they did have.  
"We have nothing here but 5 loaves and two fish."

People are lonely and we have nothing here but some paper and some pens.  
People are hungry and we have nothing here but extra zucchini and tomatoes.  
People are crestfallen and we have nothing but a smile and a few kind words.  
People are suffering and sick and bereaved and I have nothing but prayer to give.

## II.

These are the meager resources at hand. This is what there is to work with.  
"Bring them here," he says, "and everybody have a seat."  
Then Jesus mobilizes five sacramental verbs: take, look, bless, break, give.  
He took the bread and the fish, receiving in his hands what is offered.  
He looked up to heaven. This is not all about him. This is about the gift of daily bread.  
He blessed the bread. This isn't just food, it is holy food, food meant to nourish body and soul and community.  
He broke the bread, tearing it into pieces so that they could be shared.  
And he gave it all to the disciples, and the disciples gave it to the crowd.

I wonder whether disciples and crowd picked up on the verbs.  
Maybe each of them, when they received the bread, took it, looked to heaven,  
blessed it, broke it, and then then gave it to the person sitting next them.  
A crowd practicing gratitude and generosity.  
A crowd learning how to care for one another, sharing the resources at hand.

### III.

The disciples must have been astonished.

From "Send them away" to "You give them something to eat."

How this episode must have changed them.

What it must have meant to be enlisted in this act of trust and abundance.

What joy they must have experienced as the bearers of blessed bread.

And how astonished when all had eaten, all 5000 plus, and they went out into the crowd with baskets and gathered up the remainders, and found they had 12 baskets full.

And now they had a new question: "What will we do with the abundant leftovers?"

God wants people to be free, Prathia Hall said.

And God provides what is needed for those who want freedom and work for it.

This strange little episode in the Gospel of Matthew is about a God who wants people to be free, free from violence, free from hate, free from prejudice, free from oppression, free from hunger, free from illness, free from indignity, free from fear. And it is about a God who provides so that disciples can be empowered, so that people can be fed, that newness can break through.

I wonder if, even right now, God has given you some "bread," let's call it.

And I wonder what would happen if you took it, looked up and, giving thanks, blessed, broke, and gave it away.

Perhaps it would be more than enough.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Gary V. Simpson, Sunday's Coming from *The Christian Century*, "Freedom Spaces," July 27, 2020.