

Proper 13, Ordinary 18A
Come to the Feast
Isaiah 55.1-5 | Matthew 4.13-21
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"Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!"

Isaiah's invitation offers a rich lens through which to hear the feeding of the five thousand. Both readings begin with human hunger and end in divine abundance. Isaiah calls those without money to receive water, wine, milk and rich food "without money and without price." In Matthew, a crowd gathers in a deserted place with no visible means of feeding itself. Yet everyone eats and is filled, and twelve baskets remain.

Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four Gospels. The early Christian communities clearly regarded this meal as central to understanding who Jesus was and the kind of community he was gathering.

But Levine also insists that we hear the story within Jesus' Jewish world.

It carries the taste of Israel's earlier stories: manna given in the wilderness; Elijah and the widow whose meal and oil do not run out; and Elisha feeding a hundred people with twenty barley loaves—and having food left over.

Behind them all stands the God of Isaiah: the God who calls the hungry to eat and whose word falls like rain upon the earth, producing seed for the sower and bread for the eater.

Jesus does not replace this tradition. He inhabits it. He embodies it. In a deserted place, he makes Isaiah's invitation tangible:

Come. Receive. Eat.

This is more than a story about physical hunger—but it is never less than that. Scripture does not separate spiritual longing from bodily need as easily as we sometimes do. Isaiah does not offer an abstract idea to the thirsty. Jesus does not tell hungry people to transcend their bodies. Bodies need water. Bodies need bread. God’s compassion takes material form.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes embodiment as “the practice of wearing skin.” In *An Altar in the World*, she invites us to discover the sacred, not by escaping ordinary physical life, but by paying closer attention to it. Our bodies, the ground beneath our feet, the people we encounter and the food we share can all become places of meeting with God.

That is what happens here. The wilderness becomes an altar. The grass becomes holy ground. Bread and fish become signs of grace. Human hands receive, carry and share what God provides.

The contrast in Matthew is especially sharp because this feast follows another banquet.

Herod has held a feast in his palace, surrounded by wealth, status and political power. That banquet ends with John the Baptist’s head presented on a platter. Herod’s table is governed by fear, pride and the need to protect power. Jesus’ feast takes place in the wilderness among ordinary people and is governed by compassion.

One table sacrifices a human life to preserve a ruler’s reputation. The other gathers vulnerable people and gives them life. One feast produces death; the other, healing and abundance.

Jesus has withdrawn after hearing of John’s death. He is carrying his own grief and seeking solitude. Perhaps the crowd is grieving too.

Perhaps John’s murder has become the final straw for people already living under the cruelty of Herod’s rule.

When Jesus sees them, Matthew tells us that he is moved with compassion.

The Greek word is *splagchnizomai*. It is a bodily word, connected to the inner organs—the gut, the place where pain is physically felt. This is not pity offered safely from a distance. Jesus recognises something of his own grief in theirs. Their suffering reaches into his suffering.

His grief does not close him to the pain of others. It deepens his capacity to recognise it. From a place marked by death, Jesus begins to create a feast of life.

Jesus does not see simply “a crowd” —an anonymous problem to be managed. He sees people. He notices their sickness, weariness and hunger. Compassion begins in the quality of his attention.

Matthew tells us that about five thousand men were fed, “besides women and children.” Levine therefore calls this the feeding of “the five thousand—or more.” The women and children may not be included in the official count, but they are present. They are hungry. They eat and are filled.

God’s attention extends beyond the official count. No one is merely an extra in this story.

The disciples, however, see only the limitations of the situation. The place is deserted. The hour is late. The crowd is large. Their resources are small.

“Send the crowds away,” they say, “so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

Their answer is reasonable. Let the marketplace deal with the hunger. Let each person find whatever they can afford. Let everyone become responsible for themselves.

But Jesus replies:

“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

“They need not go away” is an arresting phrase. The disciples believe that whatever is needed must be found somewhere else. Jesus insists that the place of abundance is here—in the very place they have named as empty.

The place of abundance is here.

What if we proclaimed that as we approached the table of grace? What if we remembered it when our resources appeared inadequate, when grief followed us into the wilderness, or when the needs before us seemed too great?

The disciples protest that they have only five loaves and two fish. Jesus does not shame them for having too little. He simply says, “Bring them here to me.”

He receives what they have, looks towards heaven, blesses and breaks the bread, and gives it back to them.

The disciples do not create the abundance, but they participate in it. What they place in Jesus’ hands is returned to their hands as both gift and responsibility. Jesus enables them to do what they could never have achieved from their own resources:

“You give them something to eat.”

Readers continue to debate what kind of miracle took place. Did the food multiply in Jesus’ hands? Or did his actions release a hidden generosity, prompting people to share what they had?

Levine observes that the sharing interpretation may appeal to our modern sensibilities. Sharing can certainly be miraculous—and we may sometimes enjoy stories about people sharing more than we enjoy

actually sharing. Yet ancient hearers would have recognised this as an extraordinary act of divine provision, recalling the miraculous feedings of Israel's Scriptures.

Perhaps we do not need to explain the wonder away before receiving its meaning. The proclamation of the story is that hunger encounters compassion, insufficiency becomes abundance, and scarcity does not have the final word.

The question is not only, "How did this happen?"

It is also, "What does this reveal?"

And then, more urgently, "What does it ask of us?"

The disciples focus on what they do not have. Jesus asks them to notice what is present: five loaves, two fish, open grass, willing hands and a crowd ready to sit down together.

The miracle begins with attention.

This does not mean pretending that scarcity is unreal. Five loaves are not ordinarily enough for thousands of people. Hunger, poverty and unequal access to food remain painfully real. But the story challenges the assumption that our smallness excuses our inaction.

Jesus does not ask the disciples to manufacture abundance from their own resources. He asks them to bring what they have and become participants in what God is doing.

The feeding of the multitude looks both backward and forward. It recalls God feeding Israel in the wilderness and Elisha multiplying the loaves. It anticipates the prophets' vision of the great feast where peoples and nations gather in peace. And it foreshadows the Eucharist: Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it.

To receive Christ in bread and wine is not only to receive personal comfort. It is to participate in Christ's vision of compassion, liberation and reconciliation. We cannot celebrate the Eucharist while remaining indifferent to hunger. The bread passes from Jesus into the disciples' hands, and from their hands to the crowd.

The feast is gift, but it is also vocation.

Those who are welcomed become people who welcome. Those who are fed become people who feed. Those who receive mercy are drawn into the work of making mercy material.

"Come to the feast," then, is both invitation and vocation.

Come without money, achievement or proof of deserving. Come with your thirst, your grief, your doubt and whatever small offering you possess. Let yourself be welcomed. Sit down and taste what Love has prepared.

Then pay attention.

Notice the sacred ground beneath your feet, the bread within your reach and the people beside you. Notice who may still be standing at the edge of the gathering.

Take what has been placed into your hands and share it—until those who might have been sent away are welcomed, all eat and are filled, and the abundant love of God becomes visible among us.

The place of abundance is here.

Come to the feast.