

“... and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”(Matt 14:14)¹

What is a miracle? The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 is well-known, by Christians and non-Christians alike. No wonder, since an account of this event occurs in all four gospels. The idea of Jesus doing much with so little, against great odds, resonates with us.

What does a miracle look like for us today? Most would say the complete and decisive eradication of Covid-19, whether by vaccine or some other medical intervention. Such a miracle would be for the common good. What about our personal miracles? Perhaps, being free of pain that accompanies a chronic disease or even the achievement of a long-needed reconciliation with a friend or family member. Or, perhaps, an unexpected encounter with a celebrity, or sports figure, etc. Or, even a week free of online meetings. The wonder and awe of the miracle grabs us, draws in, but we are apt to overlook the many conditions that shape the miracle itself.

Miracles are always framed by some other event than the miracle itself. *“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself”* (14:13). What had Jesus heard? Jesus had heard of the death of his cousin, John the Baptizer, from John’s disciples. John was beheaded on the orders of Herod Antiphas, whom John angered for criticizing Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife. In grief, distraught and saddened, Jesus, went to a deserted place to be alone. He had not anticipated the crowds following him. This place was in such a deserted location, that the crowds probably traveled, at least, 4

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to 5 hours to get there. And so, Jesus was filled with compassion when he saw the crowd.

What is compassion? First and foremost, compassion is not pity. There is a mistaken tendency to substitute one for the other. Compassion is a deep feeling of identity with another in their suffering. Compassion is characterized by warmth and caring. Compassion compels one to action. Jesus was moved, even though he, himself, was grieving.

And this desolate place, what does it remind you of? It is highly symbolic of the wilderness where Jesus was tempted and of the wilderness where the Jews wandered after the Exodus. The wilderness is a place of wandering and uncertainty: there are questions about meaning and identity, security and sustenance, and of wondering “where is God? Where *is* God? Will God come through on God’s promises of faithfulness and providing “our daily bread”?

God speaks in the language of miracles. A miracle is a message from God. And the message God sends through Christ Jesus is the miraculous power of God’s love. Compassion is an expression of God’s heart and another name for God’s love.

The disciples are very linear in their thinking. They see the day getting late and everyone needs to eat, especially this large group of people and there aren’t any options. The disciples have skills - they know how to move people along, how to manage the crowd, to facilitate some interactions between Jesus and others. However, they believe they can’t do the impossible. Jesus simply says to them “*You give them something to eat*” (v. 16). We can hear the “but” coming before we read on. And we

could say the “the devil is in the details”, as any good organizer would know. But the details are very few: just five loaves and two fish.

To be clear, we know nothing about the details of this miracle. It’s not like Jesus spat on the dirt, made mud and sprinkled it over the bread and fish. The working of this miracle is so low-key and so familiar that it tends to be overlooked - it is prayer, a prayer with no name, but directed to the dwelling place of God. We don’t know even Jesus’ exact words - just the summary:

“he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people” (v. 19).

He looked up to heaven: Jesus hallows, blesses God’s name. Remember, Jesus’ first temptation in the wilderness was the act of primary rebellion, independence from God, a sin in and of itself.

Jesus blesses the loaves: Jesus offers an expression of praise and thanksgiving to God. Jesus blesses God, the giver of the bread, and gives us a reminder that God provides for us, always:

“All things come of thee, O LORD, and of thine have we given thee.”²

Jesus gave them to the disciples: Why did Jesus give the bread and loaves to the disciples and not directly to the people first? Jesus is demonstrating the responsibility that comes with discipleship, the responsibility that God has entrusted to each of us by virtue of our baptism. As we partake of the Eucharist today, let’s remember the Jesus’ prayer.

² Doxology, 1 Chronicles 29:14

Discipleship, at its core, is a call to action. Discipleship is a call to know Jesus, and in knowing him, becoming an agent of change in the world. To know Jesus is to know his heart, and to know the heart of Jesus is to foster compassion for ourselves and for others:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*³

Take some time this week to consider the miracle you may wish for. Let prayer be your guide.

³ A Prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi