

Natalie W. Bell  
August 2, 2020

***Abundance in the Wilderness***  
***Matthew 14:13-21***

*<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." <sup>17</sup> They replied, "We have **nothing** here but five loaves and two fish." <sup>18</sup> And he said, "Bring them here to me." <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. <sup>21</sup> And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

This story comes after a ***tragedy involving John the Baptist***, Jesus' cousin, the one who had prepared the way for Him as Messiah. Listen to the verses just before this story:

*Herod had arrested John the Baptist, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, <sup>[b]</sup> <sup>4</sup> because John had been telling him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." <sup>5</sup> Though Herod <sup>[c]</sup> wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet. <sup>6</sup> But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod <sup>7</sup> so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. <sup>8</sup> Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." <sup>9</sup>*

**And Herod did as she asked.**

Then John's disciples came for his body, and went to tell Jesus.

That is the **CONTEXT** of this story.

In response, Jesus withdraws to a **DESERTED place** by himself.  
 He was surely grieving the loss of his dear friend,  
 He may have been pondering his own death,  
 knowing was to come.

The word for **deserted** is important.

It's **eremos**.

It means a solitary, desert or wilderness place.

Which **echoes many stories** in the Bible—in the Old and New Testaments.

In Hebrew thought,  
 the **desert or wilderness is a place of wandering, testing, and temptation**.  
 The Israelites escape Egypt, cross the Red Sea,  
 and spend 40 years wandering in the **wilderness** with Moses,  
 before entering the Promised Land.  
 Jesus is tempted by Satan in the **wilderness**.

But the wilderness or desert is also a place **where God does amazing things**.  
 The Israelites receive bread from heaven,  
 Called manna, which sustains them, as we read in Exodus 16.  
 Jesus is waited on by angels who feed him after his fasting and temptation.

But what if there's **another reason why the desert place is important?**

What if it's where **we find ourselves TODAY?**

Aren't we in a desert place,

wandering through the wilderness of COVID-19?

A place we've never been before, a place of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety?

And we, like the Israelites,

And like the crowd of 5000, are wondering what God will do for us.

We too are **hungry for God's help** and provision, aren't we?

So the **time and place of this story** can really speak to us today!

Matthew also sets up a **stark CONTRAST** that speaks to our lives today.  
 Although this passage starts after Herod's brutal party,  
 It happens in the shadow of it.

On one hand we have **Herod Antipas**,  
the son of Herod the Great, who ruled when Jesus was born,  
and had all the baby boys murdered out of fear of the newborn Messiah.  
This younger Herod, like his father, is all about power, might, and brutality.

On the other hand, **we have Jesus**.  
He is not about power, he is about people.  
We see him moved by compassion for the crowds that follow him.  
Even in his grief and anguish he does not turn away from their needs.

Where Herod acts out of **brutality**, Jesus acts out of **hospitality**.  
He is moved to meet the needs of the people—in body and soul.  
He starts by curing the sick, and then moves to feed the hungry crowd.

This **contrast between POWER AND PEOPLE** is seen in our lives today.  
Don't we see leaders grasping for power?  
Haven't we seen the power of harsh words, violence, and brutality?

And then we hear a story like this.  
**Calling us to seek the good of people, not power.**

This story **can really speak** to us if we let it.  
**WE find ourselves in a desert place.**  
And we are called to see and follow a different way of life.  
**The way of Jesus.**

But there is still **another important contrast** in this story.  
A contrast that exists still today.  
The contrast is between the **DISCIPLES AND JESUS**.

The disciples see the hungry crowds,  
and **want them sent away** to buy food at the end of a long day.  
Jesus sees them and feels gut-level **compassion for** them.

And while the disciples want **Jesus to send** the crowd away.  
Jesus wants the **disciples to feed** the crowd!

The disciples see *hungry bodies*,  
 Jesus sees *people hungry for more* than just food.

The disciples see **scarcity**.  
 They say to Jesus: “We have **nothing** here but five loaves and two fish.”  
 Did you catch that?  
 We have **NOTHING**.  
 This five loaves and 2 fish can’t feed such a crowd.  
 It’s as good as nothing!  
 Ever felt that way?  
 That you have nothing to offer? Nothing to give?

In contrast, Jesus sees **abundance**.  
 Bring the food here to me, he says.  
 Then he **takes, blesses, breaks, and gives** it back to the disciples,  
 So that they will feed the crowd!

Where the disciples see **just 7 pieces** of food,  
 Jesus sees **7 pieces of food**—  
 7, the number of completeness, fullness, wholeness,  
 just like the creation story!

And in fact, just like the **parable of the mustard seed** in Matthew 13,  
 where the smallest seed becomes the largest tree,  
 these 7 little pieces of food lead to everyone eating,  
 and **12 baskets** of leftovers!

12.  
 Just like the 12 tribes of Israel.  
 Just like the 12 disciples.  
 Do you think these numbers are coincidence? Definitely not!

In this important miracle story—  
 so important that it is the **only miracle story** found in all 4 Gospels—  
 we have a miracle that is bigger than feeding 5000 plus people!  
 We have the miracle of **Jesus’ love**.  
 Of God’s **provision**.

Of ***Jesus in action***.

Jesus is not preaching....this time he is ***acting out*** his love...  
and doing it through his disciples.

This is also a miracle of ***discipleship***.

For it is ***not actually Jesus*** who feeds this crowd of 5000,  
plus women and children.

It is the ***disciples who feed*** them!

What do you think that ***means for us today?***

What does it mean to you that ***the disciples feed the people?***

Why is that ***so important?***

How are we supposed to step into these disciples' shoes?

After all, the Bible reminds us that ***we are the body of Christ***,  
His hands and feet on earth today.

So what if, we are being asked to bring what we have to God,  
and trust that it is more than enough?

Where we fear there is scarcity,

What if we are being asked to trust in God's abundance?

Where we want God to take care of the problems around us,

What if ***we are being asked to meet*** the needs of the people, with God's help?

And what if that's the Good News?

That when we are willing to ***give*** what we have,

When we are willing to ***trust*** in God's love, provision, and miracles,

There is more than enough—there are leftovers!

Friends, that is the ***Good News of the Gospel***.

Even in this wilderness time and place,

Jesus uses whatever we have, and turns it into abundance!

***God always provides,***

***more*** than we could ever ask or imagine.

We are just invited to ***open our hearts and lives***

to the power of Jesus in our midst!

And for this, all God's people say, Amen