

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost - A - Proper 13 (2026)

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 17:1-7, 16

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

‘Jesus said to the disciples, “You give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” Jesus said, “Bring them here to me.”...he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves...and all ate and were filled.’ In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Five loaves and two fish for 5,000 men, besides women and children. A monthly social security check for mounds of unpaid medical debt. Monthly SNAP benefits to feed a family of five with virtually no other forms of consistent income. A savings account with a balance of \$22 to deal with thousands of dollars worth of desperately needed car repairs. Three or four part-time jobs that still do not generate sufficient income for safe and appropriate housing. Impossible circumstances, we might say. Problems for others to solve, some proclaim. Why bother, still others lament. Five loaves and two fish for such a great crowd. What’s a person to do? We can all relate, can’t we? We’ve all experienced those moments of feeling powerless against what we ‘see’ as insurmountable odds, maybe even moments of sheer hopelessness, moments of five loaves and two fish.

Insufficiency in the face of overwhelming need or adversity was a reality then as it is today. The generation Tom Brokaw made famous in his best-selling book, *The Greatest Generation*, endured the combination of war, a massive economic downturn, and an environmental disaster, the Dust Bowl. Unemployment during the Great Depression ballooned from 3-4% in 1929 to 25% by 1933, when some 12 to 15 million people were unemployed. The paychecks stopped, but the needs didn’t. People left the Plains in search of employment in the cities and found nothing when they arrived. Soup lines ruled the day. Being poor turned to becoming destitute. What can we do with five loaves and two fish?

Today's account from Matthew's Gospel is the only miracle from Jesus' earthly ministry recorded in all four gospels, telling me, at least, that there are important lessons, both spiritual and practical for our gleanings that deal with scarcity, abundance, provision, participation, vision, compassion, and God's version of mathematics.

Let's start with some important context. At the end of chapter 13, Jesus has been rejected by the people in his hometown of Nazareth. In chapter 14, the verses preceding today's reading tell of the death of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, beheaded by King Herod. After the disciples deliver this horrible news to Jesus, he sought some time alone with God to ponder the people of Nazareth's unbelief and grieve John's death. However, the needs of the ever-expanding crowd fill him with compassion, a compassion that supersedes his need for solitude. As my mother used to tell me, "When you're sad or depressed, go find something to do for someone else; it will soothe your soul." Biblically wise advice, indeed.

I'm speculating here, but I suspect the disciples are sensing a growing anxiety that comes with such a mass gathering of folks at the end of a long day. They ask Jesus to send them away into the surrounding villages to obtain food. Jesus then does a very Jesus thing; he elicits their participation in dealing with the situation, telling them, "They need not go away; *you* give them something to eat," to which they replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." I can only imagine the look on their faces.

Scarcity unnerves us, doesn't it? Scarcity can be *very real*, right? Continuing scarcity creates fear, and fear generates a variety of bad and unhealthy behaviors. Scarcity isn't just about not having enough of some material good; at its worst, it changes the way we think; it forces us into survival mode; it chokes imaginative thinking and hinders the scope of possibilities. I've witnessed its damage in more than a few churches, where lack of resources and dwindling membership decimated the vitality they once knew. I've witnessed the hopelessness of pending doom, of congregations who 'gave up' and subsequently 'gave in' to their created and inevitable death spiral. Death of what any particular congregation may have been may, in fact, come, but it need not be dreadful. We are a 'Resurrection

People,’ and for new life to arrive, death needs to take place. Another sermon for another day.

But Scripture teaches another way of thinking and living: Trust in the provision of God and the resulting gift of abundance. To the challenge of a hungry crowd and meager supplies of bread and fish, Jesus said, “Bring them here to me.” This is an example of what Frederick Bruner in his book *Matthew: Volume 2* refers to as learning how to count to eight. I call it God’s mathematics.

To the five loaves and two fish, Jesus’ contribution is added to the equation. ‘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.’ This is the first indication that something miraculous has happened: from five loaves and two fish, a divine blessing was added, and thousands ate and were filled.

While this and the feeding of the four thousand, also found in Matthew and Mark’s gospels, are examples most of us remember, they are not the first in Scripture. Remember the story of the prophet Elisha, who took the offerings of twenty loaves of bread of the firstfruits from a man from Baal-shalishah, and directed his servant to feed the gathering of one hundred men? His servant, like the disciples and many of us today, protested that it wasn’t sufficient, to which the prophet responded, “For thus says the Lord, ‘For they shall eat and have some left.’”

Or when Elisha encounters the widow whose supply of oil was desperately low, an asset that was meager against the debt she owed that might very well result in the loss of her two children. Elisha told her to go borrow vessels from her neighbors, and one by one, they were filled; the debt was paid, and she had enough left over to live on.

Five loaves and two fish for nearly 10,000 people. Twenty loaves for 100 men. One jar of oil to save the lives of two children. On their face, impossible

circumstances. But God takes *whatever* we have to offer, and the impossible becomes not only possible, but miraculous. We too often ‘see’ our circumstances as bleak, if not hopeless. We experience loss, instances of injustice, limited resources, and unyielding demands and turn inward, trying to protect what little we have left that sustains us. But God says that he can and will use our losses, injustices, limited resources, and desire to protect into moments of divine renewal and abundance. God proves again and again that his version of math wins every time. When God’s vision becomes our vision, possibilities emerge, circumstances are understood in their proper perspective, hope shines in the darkness, and all are fed and filled.

If you’re in a ‘five loaves and two fish’ sort of circumstance, I invite you to add God to the equation, offer God whatever asset, strength, or resilience you have left, pray for a new vision of what ‘could be,’ and then expect the miraculous to happen. Give glory to God, and then invite others into your new reality, a reality that you might not have previously imagined. Something new might very well emerge out of something old, not necessarily limited to a renewal of what was. I don’t know; this is why we call it a miracle. For Jesus came that we might have life, and to have it abundantly. Let’s join him in making this happen.