

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 2, 2026 – 10 Pentecost – The Feeding of Five Thousand
Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:17; Matthew 14:13-21
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This morning's Gospel lesson begins, "Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." I wondered why. In the passage immediately before the lesson we heard this morning, we learn that Jesus had just received news that John the Baptist, his cousin and a great prophet of God's kingdom, had been executed by Herod. When he heard this, Jesus withdrew to be by himself in his grief. We all know the need to be alone when we have lost someone important to us. Jesus must also have been thinking of the danger he faced in continuing his public ministry, his teaching about God's kingdom. His heart must have been heavy and his mind burdened. He needed time alone and time for prayer.

But the people found out where Jesus was and followed him. They came to Jesus with all their needs, and "he had compassion on them and cured their sick." There was a great crowd – five thousand men as well as women and children.

Can you imagine that day? The crowd. The noise. Confusion. So many people struggling to bring the sick to one man, Jesus. The joy of those who were cured. The spread of news as people were healed. High emotion. Intensity of all kinds. We aren't told what the disciples were doing, but we can imagine that they were kept busy all day, helping Jesus and helping the people. By evening Jesus and the disciples must have been exhausted, emotionally and physically. It isn't surprising that the disciples asked Jesus to send the people away to buy their own food for supper. They must have felt that they had nothing left to give. Surely nothing that would meet the needs of thousands of hungry people.

But Jesus called them to look at the situation differently, with compassion. He challenged them to see that moment as an opportunity to share and to trust God. He said, "You give them something to eat. They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.'" Another very human response that we can relate to: we have "nothing but." Can you hear the emphasis on scarcity? The first thing they say is "we have nothing," and then they say, "we have five loaves and two fish." But remember, Jesus did not ask his disciples to provide all the food that the thousands of hungry people needed. He asked them to give him what they had. Then Jesus thanked God for the five loaves and two fish, blessed the food, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the hungry. And there was more than enough for everyone. Jesus trusts that God will give him what he needs. And he teaches his disciples to do the same.

There are many people – and you might be among them – who do not believe in the miracles recorded in the Gospels. One alternative explanation given for the feeding of the five thousand is that Jesus asked everyone to share what they had, and when all the pockets and bags were emptied and the food was passed around, every man, woman, and child had plenty to eat. A different sort of miracle perhaps. The kind of miracle that has fed millions of people over the last 2,000 years, as followers of Jesus have shared God's gifts with those in need, for the love of God and in imitation of our Lord.

Of all the writings of the New Testament, including the four Gospels, Matthew's Gospel relies more than any other upon Israel's Scriptures. As the Son of God and the incarnation of the divine on earth, Jesus replaces the Temple as the place of divine presence. Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of the "law and the prophets" in the Hebrew Bible. In writing his account of Jesus miraculously feeding 5,000 people, Matthew looks back to the Old Testament book of Exodus. In chapter 16 we read how the Lord provided manna for the daily food of the hungry Israelites who were wandering in the wilderness after fleeing from slavery in Egypt. An earlier miraculous, divine provision of food for those in need.

Matthew also anticipates the future, when Jesus will share the Last Supper with the apostles. "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." From the days of the early church until now followers of Jesus have recalled his actions the night before he died: Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to the disciples. As you know, at the Last Supper Jesus identified the broken bread as his body, given for his disciples, and he commanded, "Do this for the remembrance of me."

God has called us to be followers of Jesus. God has given us all the blessings of our lives. God asks us to do what Jesus did. God asks us to receive the bread, give thanks, then break it and share it with others, in trust and faith in God.

Two verses from today's readings strike me as relevant to this call. In the passage from Isaiah, the Lord says: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" This question is in the middle of a passage full of God's invitation to enjoy an abundance of good gifts – wine, milk, rich food – all at no cost. This suggests to me that God's question offers us guidance about how to live abundantly: do not work or spend your earnings on what does not truly nourish and fill you. The Lord says, "come to me; listen, so that you may live." How shall we live? By fulfilling our part of God's covenant, by loving God and our neighbors as ourselves. That is the abundant life God promises us.

The second verse is from Psalm 145, speaking about the Lord: "You open wide your hand and satisfy the needs of every living creature." How? In part through us. In the words attributed to St. Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world." We are called to be part of the miracle of God's provision for the needs of all.

St. Paul exhorted Christians to "put on the mind of Christ." What does this morning's Gospel lesson teach us about the mind of Christ? That even when he was grieving and in mental turmoil and fatigued, Jesus was compassionate. That he always responded to those in need. That he thanked God for God's gifts and trusted in God's power to provide abundantly.

Jesus invites all of us who love him to be transformed into his likeness. Day by day, choice by choice, in the circumstances life presents to us. Imagine – if each member of all the Christian churches did this, what a miracle of God's love the world would see! In Jesus' name. Amen.