YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

[Isaiah 55:1-5](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=153#hebrew_oth_reading)

[Psalm 145: 14-21](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=153#psalm_oth_reading)

[Romans 9:1-5](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=153#epistle_reading)

[Matthew 14:13-21](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=153#gospel_reading)

A few weeks back we talked about the so-called parable of the sower and the seed and the various kinds of soil.  And we pointed out then that Jesus Himself said that understanding this parable is foundational to understanding all the other parables.  For that reason you often hear the parable of the Sower referred to as the Mother of All Parables.

In the same vein, I think, we might refer to the episode recounted in our Gospel reading for today as the Mother of All Miracles.  The importance that the apostles and the very earliest followers of Jesus attached to it is shown by the fact that it is the only one of Jesus’ miracles that is recounted by all four of the Gospel writers: you find a version of it in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and a somewhat more detailed version in the Gospel of John.

So we’re naturally led to ask what it was about this particular miracle that made it so central to their understanding of Jesus, and equally to our own understanding.

The ususal suggestion is that the miracle seems so remarkable, like making something appear out of nothing, and on a giant scale.

Yet  while it certainly is remarkable to produce out of five small loaves of bread and two fish a quantity of food sufficient to feed over five thousand people, I don’t think that’s what sets this particular miracle apart from all the others.

We’ve noted before, as have many others, that while all of the miracles recorded about Jesus seem remarkable and amazing, if you think about them, they almost all boil down to Jesus doing something God does all the time, only doing it locally and quickly.

The obvious example of that are Christ’s miracles of healing.  What is startling about Jesus healing some disease or infirmity is not that the person in question recovers: that happens every day and to all of us.  If I scratch myself, a few days later all trace of the scratch is gone.  If I come down with a cold, ten or twelve days later I’m feeling normal again.

So there is nothing miraculous about healing itself.  Or perhaps a better way of putting it is to say that the miracle of healing happens every day, all around us; that it is so commonplace that we forget just what a miracle it is, we become so used to it that we cease seeing it as one of God’s greatest blessings.

What was startling about Jesus’ acts of healing was not that people got better, but that they got better so quickly.  Jesus simply does in an efficient, concentrated fashion what God does all the time, everywhere.

And similarly for the loaves and fishes.  It is not miraculous that fish multiply: it happens everywhere.  Take a pair of fish and put them in a predator-free environment, and you will soon have more fish than you can shake a stick at.

And the same is true of bread.  The grains of wheat, if used as seed rather than ground up, can be multiplied endlessly.  A single lump of leavened flour can produce bakery’s-full of bread.

Again, it is not the fact that food can be multiplied that makes Christ’s action so remarkable – God multiplies food all the time and everywhere.  The remarkable thing about the way Christ did it is that it was so done so quickly.

So I don’t think it’s the ‘Wow’ factor of the miracle of the leaves and fishes that sets it apart from all the other miracles.

I think what sets this miracle apart from the others is that in it Jesus is showing the absolute uniqueness and centrality of Himself.

We’ve all known people, I’m sure, either in a business, or in a social grouping, or an office or even in a family, perhaps even in a church…people who serve as the lynchpin of the whole operation, people who hold everything together, as we say.  And I’m sure we could all provide examples of what happens when that central person is removed from the scene, for whatever reason; what happens then, whether immediately or by a slow process of drift, is that the original group or business, whatever it is, falls apart, goes under, comes unglued.

As that key person, as that lynchpin, is to some particular organization, that’s what Jesus is to all of creation.

By the time Paul was writing to the Colossians a few decades later, this central understanding of who Jesus was and continues to be had been fully understood.  Speaking of Jesus, Paul reminds them:

*“For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through Him and for Him.  And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Col. 1: 16-17)*.

Now let’s turn again to the miracle of the loaves and the fishes.

The accounts of this miracle that we find in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are very similar, but the language in which they are given, the way the episode is described are full of variations.  But there is one thing they have in common, one phrase is identical in each of them.

It occurs near the start of the miracle, when the scene is being laid of a huge crowd of people who have come to hear Jesus, and who have been gathered for a long time, and who are now hungry.  In each Gospel account, the issue is raised about what is to be done with these people, how they are to be fed.  And in each account, even through everything else is different, Jesus says the exact same thing:

Speaking to His disciples, he says: “…you give them something to eat.”

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In John’s Gospel, the language is different, but the point made is the same.  Before proceeding to the actual miracle, Jesus is at pains to have His disciples acknowledge that they themselves are helpless in the face of this situation of great need, to acknowledge that, without Him, they can do nothing.

And I would suggest that that is what sets this miracle apart, or perhaps a better way of putting it is that that explains why this miracle provides the foundation for all the others.

We all remember the occasion recounted in the third chapter of Acts, where Peter and John, are walking one morning to the temple and they encounter a lame beggar at the main gate. And Peter famously says: “I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (v. 6)

And while the man still clings to him in gratitude and the crowd gasps in astonishment, Peter tells them: “Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us. As though by our own power or piety we have made Him well...the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.” (vv 12. 16)

The apostles had learned their lesson well, the lesson Jesus has taught them explicitly in His final discourse, recorded in the 15th Chapter of John:

*I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*

And I think in many ways this is the hardest lesson of all to learn in the Christian life.

I don’t mean by that that it’s hard to learn how to say it or even preach it. We say it all the time, in a thousand different ways. Jesus is the source of my strength, Jesus is my one hope, He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord of all creation, my Lord and Savior etc etc. The words flow easily and in abundance.

But do we really take them seriously?

For years I’ve spent a lot of time with hospice patients, and, especially in the residence, you often see people who, when the first move in, are able to get around on their own and take care of their own needs, feed themselves, hold a pleasant conversation, even tell jokes about their predicament.

But them inevitably those people begin to slow down and become weaker. Often their minds begin to wander. And most of the time before they pass there’s a period of time when they are completely dependent on the aides and nurses. They have to be fed and cleaned and given medicine and moved from one place to another…and all of that must be done for them, every single little thing, and the nurses and aides are the ones who do it. Who do it all for them.

Apart from them, apart from the aides and the nurses, they can do nothing.

So my question as we close is this: How many of us truly realize the truth, and appreciate the truth, and live and walk in the light of the truth, that Jesus is to each one of us, now, today, what those nurses and aides are to those patients as they are crossing the final bridge?

You give them something to eat, Christ tells His students, His disciples. And their answer is, and must be, and always will be, We can’t.

In the end, life eventually brings every single person to that realization: our own helplessness. In the end, every knee must bow.

But the good news is, once we bow that knee, whether soon or late, Christ will pick us up.

In another place, Christ opens His welcoming arms by saying, not, Come to me, all who are strong and self-reliant. He says, Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Come to me, and **I** will give you something to eat.

And so, as we prepare our hearts and minds for today’s communion meal, let’s remember that Christ provides and is the Bread of Life. Without Him, outside of Him, although we live, we have no life. And let our prayer be that our hearts be always more and more open to the one and true source of our strength, of our goodness, and of our life, for it is in His own name we pray.