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Matthew 14:13-21 New Living Translation

¹³ As soon as Jesus heard the news, he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone. But the crowds heard where he was headed and followed on foot from many towns. ¹⁴ Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

¹⁵ That evening the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.”

¹⁶ But Jesus said, “That isn’t necessary—you feed them.”

¹⁷ “But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish!” they answered.

¹⁸ “Bring them here,” he said. ¹⁹ Then he told the people to sit down on the grass. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he gave the bread to the disciples, who distributed it to the people. ²⁰ They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers. ²¹ About 5,000 men were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children!

Matthew 15:29-39 New Living Translation

²⁹ Jesus returned to the Sea of Galilee and climbed a hill and sat down. ³⁰ A vast crowd brought to him people who were lame, blind, crippled, those who couldn’t speak, and many others. They laid them before Jesus, and he healed them all. ³¹ The crowd was amazed! Those who hadn’t been able to speak were talking, the crippled were made well, the lame were walking, and the blind could see again! And they praised the God of Israel.

³² Then Jesus called his disciples and told them, “I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with me for three days, and they have nothing left to eat. I don’t want to send them away hungry, or they will faint along the way.”

³³ The disciples replied, “Where would we get enough food here in the wilderness for such a huge crowd?”

³⁴ Jesus asked, “How much bread do you have?”

They replied, “Seven loaves, and a few small fish.”

³⁵ So Jesus told all the people to sit down on the ground. ³⁶ Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, thanked God for them, and broke them into pieces. He gave them to the disciples, who distributed the food to the crowd.

³⁷ They all ate as much as they wanted. Afterward, the disciples picked up seven large baskets of leftover food. ³⁸ There were 4,000 men who were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children. ³⁹ Then Jesus sent the people home, and he got into a boat and crossed over to the region of Magadan.

Mark 10:17-27 New Living Translation

¹⁷ As Jesus was starting out on his way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to him, knelt down, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁸ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus asked. “Only God is truly good. ¹⁹ But to answer your question, you know the commandments: ‘You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.’^[a]”

²⁰ “Teacher,” the man replied, “I’ve obeyed all these commandments since I was young.”

²¹ Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. “There is still one thing you haven’t done,” he told him. “Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²² At this the man’s face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!” ²⁴ This amazed them. But Jesus said again, “Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God. ²⁵ In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”

²⁶ The disciples were astounded. “Then who in the world can be saved?” they asked.

²⁷ Jesus looked at them intently and said, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God.”

Daily Miracles.

One of the things that excited me about this church when I came here to interview with the SPRC is the food bank operated by Barb and others. I have a special place in my heart for churches who feed people. It has to do with what I witnessed at my school when I was a boy. Most of you know that I attended Catholic schools. As it turns out, the sisters who taught at my grammar school, that’s first through eighth grades, fed the children in the school regularly. The convent where the sisters lived was next door to the school. If you were hungry, you could show up for school a half hour early and go to the back door of the convent. There, you would be fed. Hot oatmeal was a very common breakfast. The school had a cafeteria, and if you were going through the line, and the sisters knew that your family didn’t have much money – and they knew all the families very well – the sister at the cash register would nod you through without paying.

One morning, I was in that line at the back door of the convent at 7:30 in the morning. It was a cold wet day; we weren’t far from the ocean and I can remember smelling the salt in the air. I didn’t own a coat or a jacket; I stood

there with my uniform blue v neck sweater on, and my hands shoved in the pockets of my salt-and-pepper cords. We were all quiet, because of the cold and because we were sleepy. We waited for the door to the convent to open, and I remember smelling the oatmeal cooking inside. One boy, who was there with his little sister, hoped aloud that they would have brown sugar with the oatmeal.

But why was I at the back door of the convent, looking for a free breakfast? My parents had the money to feed me. It was my first time doing this. Why?

I'd like to shift and look at today's passages. There have been scholars over the centuries who have wondered if Matthew made a little mistake when he wrote his Gospel and described the same miracle twice, once saying that Jesus fed 5,000 and once saying he fed 4,000. The first passage says: *"About 5,000 men were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children!"* and the second one says: *"There were 4,000 men who were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children."* I'd like to look at this from the perspective that assumes that there is no mistake, that there were indeed two very similar miracles. If we assume this, there's something very intriguing that we can infer from these two parallel miracles where Jesus feeds multitudes, and each time, there is food left over.

First of all, all four Gospels record the first miracle, where 5,000+ are fed, but only Matthew and Mark record the second, where 4,000+ are fed. Let's start by considering where these miracles took place. Their locations can be narrowed down by looking at clues from the various descriptions of these miracles in the four Gospels. The feeding of the 5,000+ took place near Bethsaida, just to the northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The feeding of the 4,000+ took place in the region of Gerasenes, in or near an area called the Decapolis, which refers to an area with ten cities; this is to the southeast of the Sea of Galilee.

Why does this geography matter? Well, the first area was largely Jewish. The second area was largely Gentile, or non-Jewish. And consider this: After the first miracle, there were twelve baskets of leftovers. As it turns out, there were twelve tribes in Israel. After the second miracle, there were seven baskets of leftovers. As it turns out, there were seven Gentile nations in Canaan when the Israelites entered it. Also, as it turns out, seven is a number that biblically, is symbolic of completeness or of completing some tasks. In Genesis, it was on the seventh day that God rested after creating the world. In Exodus, animals had to be seven days old to be used for sacrifice. Joshua had to march around Jericho for seven days. People have argued that the use of seven in the second feeding

miracle suggests completeness in the sense that God is present for all people, i.e., not just Jews, but Gentiles, as well.

This theory, that the two feedings represent more than just Jesus' power to perform miracles, and in fact, that they have heavy symbolic meaning, is very old. Origen of Alexandria lived from about 184 A.D. to 253. He was one of the first Christian scholars, and he was born in Alexandria in north Africa. He wrote a couple thousand documents and is considered one of the so-called "Church Fathers". He proposed this theory, that the first miracle was performed for a Jewish audience and the second was performed for a Gentile audience, and that these two miracles form an allegory, i.e., a story with a hidden meaning, in this case making the point that God offers salvation for all people. The first Christians were Jews, but then Gentiles became Christians, and God gives salvation to all.

There's a subtlety to this possible allegory. Remember that the Apostles were Jews, and they were reluctant to embrace Gentiles as followers of Jesus. In fact, it was Paul – who was not one of the original twelve Apostles – who was later named the "Apostle to the Gentiles", and he was a Jew, too. The other Apostles, at least initially remained in the Jerusalem area after Jesus was resurrected; they weren't that comfortable ministering to non-Jews. These

miracles might have been an attempt by Jesus to convince his Apostles to minister not just to Jews who might want to follow Jesus as their long-prophesied Messiah, but also to Gentiles who had no relationship with God yet.

What's the lesson for us, today? First of all, there have been many people over the centuries who have suggested that the miracles in the New Testament were added to the story of Jesus' life by early believers. The argument is that Jesus didn't actually perform any miracles, but in order to buttress the fledgling Christian faith, the Gospel writers, or whoever influenced them with written and/or oral stories about Jesus, made the miracle stories up. And any arguments that the miracles have obvious symbolic elements in them seems to further support the theory that indeed, the miracles never actually happened – and that in fact, maybe we're supposed to realize this.

But Jesus might have deliberately performed a feeding miracle for Jews and for Gentiles, to show that he wasn't just there to serve as the Messiah of the Jews. He was also there to offer salvation to Gentiles as well. He could have deliberately arranged for there to be twelve and seven baskets of leftovers.

I'd like to get back to why I was in line at the back door of the convent, waiting with the kids who were looking for a free breakfast that morning. I wasn't

there because I was hungry. There was a kid with whom I often rode my bike to school. Let's call him Andy. Andy had met me part the way to school because I lived further away. As we were biking the rest of the way to school, he told me that he was hungry, that his father had been very sick and lost his job as a result. They were out of food that morning. I told him that if we pedaled hard, we could get to school in time for him to get breakfast. All he had to do was get in line at the back door of the convent. But he was too proud and he said there was no way was he going to get in line for free food and have all the other kids find out.

I told him that I would get in line with him. He was hungry and so that was enough to convince Andy. He said he would do it if I would go with him. I didn't suggest this because I was brave. I didn't even stop to think about other kids getting the idea that my parents were broke. I just wanted my buddy Andy to get something to eat. I had a nice big bowl of hot oatmeal – with lots of brown sugar.

After we ate, the sisters shooed us off to school. My friend thanked me for going with him. I shrugged, happy to have had a second breakfast. It was later that week, when I biked home from school with Andy, that I stopped at his house to hang out for a while. Andy's family had managed to get a little money, to see them over until Andy's dad found a job, which he eventually did. But that day,

when I was in Andy's room after school, his father popped his head inside the room. Andy was off doing something, and I was in there alone. His father said that Andy had told him what I had done. He was clearly a little embarrassed, but he thanked me. I told him it was no big deal, that I was hungry anyhow. But as he pulled away, back into the hallway, I could see tears in the eyes of Andy's father.

There is a famous philosopher named David Hume, who was Scottish and lived in the 1700s. He argued that a miracle was something that was a "violation of the laws of nature". He took a strong stand against the likelihood of miracles being real, but he lived in a very Christian age and nation, and so he didn't come right out and deny the existence of God.

Well, the miracles described in the New Testament are indeed a violation of the laws of nature. So was what those sisters did, and that's my point today. The big deal wasn't that I accompanied my friend to breakfast. It was that I witnessed what the sisters were doing. It's also a miracle when people in this church feed the hungry. Humans do seem to be inherently selfish. We act like wild animals who are ignorantly fighting to survive and capable of nothing else. That's the nature of evil. It does that to us. As a result, when a person does something to help others, and when that act does that person no benefit, we get excited about

it. But it's what Jesus taught us to do. He taught us to fight the evil that makes us selfish and to go against what nature seems to be telling us to do.

Maybe Jesus' miracles did indeed have two levels of truth in them. The first was to show his Apostles and us who he is. The second was to show the Apostles and us the importance of doing things for other people, even if it feels unnatural. Jesus wants us to perform miracles ourselves – by taking a stand against the evil in this world that causes people and nations to do horrible things to each other.

That brings us to our third Bible passage. In it, Jesus tells a man that it's almost impossible for a rich man to get into Heaven. That man obeys all the commandments, but something is missing, something that is almost impossible for humans to do. He must give to others. But Jesus tells us to have hope, because: *"Everything is possible with God."* The biggest miracles are when we think about others instead of ourselves. That's the hidden meaning in the miracles of Jesus – that we should emulate Jesus by doing our own miracles.

And when children witness these acts – like I witnessed the sisters feeding children – it impacts those children in a deep, fundamental way. When we show children how to go against our nature and perform miracles, we are giving them that incredible gift of performing miracles themselves.