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Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, a blind man and a man with an unresponsive hand approached a great healer begging to be healed. They had received in a dream a vision that this healer could help them if he followed specific instructions. So, after some coaxing, the healer spat in the blind man's eye and as he wiped the spittle away, the man's sight was restored. Then the healer stepped on the withered hand and immediately it began to work again. Everyone was amazed. It was a miracle.

Once upon another time, a man was with his companions, and they came to a river. The man began to walk upon the water to the other side, and his companions heard a booming voice say, "Greetings!" to their friend. They became frightened because it was an otherworldly voice. This was the same man who was also known to appear in two towns at the same hour. It was said he performed many miracles.

These stories, among countless others being told in the first century, could have been talking about Jesus. The miraculous healing of the blind man

and the man with the withered hand were said to be performed by the Roman Emperor Vespasian who ruled from 69-79. Whereas the man who walked on water and could be at once in two places was Pythagoras who lived from 570-495 BCE. These pagan miracle stories swirled around along with tales of rabbi wonder workers and the miracles from the Old Testament that Moses, Elijah, and Elisha performed. Incredible tales were part of the first century world—so common as to be like furniture in the room of the world. People saw them as ordinary—in the sense that God was not seen to be breaking any of nature's laws by making wondrous events happen. This was all part and parcel of the way the world was understood to be. The meaning of such an event could be disputed, but the fact of the event itself was not reported for (or tested for) accuracy; it pointed to a different kind of truth.

This worldview is a very different vantage than how we approach miracles today. Nowadays, we hear a story such as, "They were in a car accident and should have died, but they walked away without a scratch. It's a miracle. God must have been protecting them for some purpose," or "I prayed that the cancer would go away and it did. It was a miracle," or "Please God, grant us a miracle and help the Red Sox win the World Series." Such stories reveal a worldview in which God sometimes acts exceptionally outside of the ordinary—and only for those who have enough faith. This contemporary interpretation of miracles is *not* what our Christian miracle stories, like the feeding of the more than five thousand in our Gospel today, are about.

Gospel miracle stories are not about showcasing Jesus as a man with special powers. Instead they show the coming of the kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus acts in miraculous and non-miraculous ways, just like other wonderworkers of the time. However, unlike many others, Jesus's miracles point beyond themselves. They point beyond Jesus. They express a God-centric, not Jesus-centric, worldview. Jesus *himself* is God-centric—always looking to God, praying to God, and following God's call to him. Miracle stories do not typically happen as a reward to someone's faith. Instead, they make the presence and power of the kingdom of God visible to everyone, whether they believe the story or not.

A few important points about how these stories operate in the gospels. First, the people for whom Matthew's gospel was written were expecting the end of time to happen soon—within their lifetime. Miracle stories here were told in part as a manifestation of the fulfillment of such expectations. Second, miracle language is insider language. The telling of a miracle story is a way for believers to clarify and express their faith, not a way for them to convert outsiders. Third, each miracle portrays an act of God in Jesus to deliver humans from something posing a threat to authentic life—that person or person living as the person who God created them to be. In this, each miracle exposes a separation from God, from our truest selves, and the need for salvation of many kinds: from sickness, thirst, hunger, demonic possession, being without purpose, natural disasters, and of course from sin and death. Finally, each miracle tells us something about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and holds this up to us in a shining, concise narrative. Think about it. It is breathtaking.

We can see this in our Gospel story today. Jesus withdraws to a deserted place by himself, but the crowds follow him. Jesus has compassion for them and cures the sick among them. Here, he delivers a multitude of humanity from sickness and returns them to their authentic selves—healed and restored to community. This takes a long time. So long that the hour is late and the disciples want to send the crowd off.

Jesus surprises them by saying, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” Now isn’t that interesting? Jesus does not say that *he* will give them something to eat but tells the disciples “you give them something to eat,” thus inviting the disciples into this miracle as well, knowing that God provides for human life. It does not matter that these people are poor, desperate, tired, and do not have much to offer in return. The disciples are tasked to give food to everyone, regardless of social status. It is not a transactional relationship. God asks nothing in return.

The disciples are like little children who go into the kitchen, open the refrigerator and say, “There’s nothing to eat!” While there is not apparent abundance to the disciples, there is also not nothing. At this point, Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish and he focuses on God. He looks up to heaven, where the people of the time believed God dwelled; he blesses and breaks the loaves; and he gives them back to the disciples. (Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?) Then the disciples give the bread to the crowds, where everyone eats their fill, with twelve baskets left over.

Jesus calls the disciples—and us—to dream bigger. He entrusted the disciples to work together to feed the crowd, and he calls upon us to do the same.

We are invited into this miracle story. We are reminded yet again that God provides for human life, and we must respond.

How many times have we been given blessed nourishment—salvation of some kind—and not passed it along to people who needed it? Jesus passes the bread on to the crowd, and *then* the miracle happens.

Jesus is holding the loaves and fishes out to you. Someone is waiting for you to share the blessing, to be invited into the miracle.

What will you do?