

Sermon Notes: July 25, 2021

Focus: Feeding the 5000, Manna and Lunchboxes [Lectionary Readings](#)

There are at least two ways to understand the feeding of the 5000 story: Sharing is caring and manna from heaven.

Sharing is caring in this view, everyone got fed was because some overachievers brought their full lunch pails and shared with those who didn't. Out of this abundance of sharing, twelve basketfuls were left over. This became a popular understanding with the rise of Liberation Theology in Latin America (until it was summarily gutted by the RC church).



People like the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez would also hasten to add that the miracle was still a miracle, but that the bread met real needs for food and not just as a stand in for heavenly manna. Today, it is a little too easy to dispense with miracle altogether and just focus on care bear style sharing-is-caring.

Manna from Heaven This view is what we learned in Sunday School. Jesus is so awesome to feed 5000. His clear power and connection to God overflows into the miracle. This event was one more sign where the people got a glimpse into the heavenly nature of Jesus. The miracle of the 5000 reenacts manna coming down from heaven. In Numbers 11 and Exodus 16, God rained down daily manna (a sort of "bread") to sustain the Hebrews in the desert. In similar form Jesus brings sustaining bread to the gathered.

Me I think in good Midrashic style both interpretations belong side-by-side. Both are limited but stronger together. Liberation theology was dangerous to the Catholic church and even now it distances itself from a theology it considers Marxist. At the same time over-relying on Superhero Jesus can make one callous to the material needs of people in our midst. The balance of the two might satisfy Goldilocks: not too much heaven, not too much sharing, just right.

Freedom What I love about this story too is that Jesus slipped away from the "movement" to make him a king right after the miracle. He was not selling concessions or looking for people to give testimonials for how bread changed their world. He just wanted people to be free and was trying get out of the way. Too often, we want people to fawn over our charitable giving and acts. We want to be Kings and Queens of the benevolent giving society.

I got a taste of how even my best intentions might be a little toxic and need reform. My youngest has a lot of Legos. Kimberly spent an enormous amount of time recreating whole sets to give to charity. The staff of the place where we donated gathered all the employees and volunteers on site to tell us how great it was... which it was. Upon reflection, I kind of wished we had just dropped and ran. I wanted to see the director, so that she could praise **my** son. I am glad many children will have opportunities to build with the Legos but I might have enjoyed the experience more had I taken Jesus' cue from the gospel and just slipped away.

Maybe this miracle is 3 realities: lunchboxes, heavenly bread, and freedom

5000 is big deal in the Bible The feeding of the 5000 is in all four gospels so it made an impression. Today is John's version. Mark emphasizes that the people needed a leader. Matthew focuses on the size and scope of the feeding. Luke makes Jesus the host-with-the-most. While John, as always, focuses on Jesus being in total control of his destiny.

American History – failed experiment in freedom

Ever heard of Callie House (1861 – 1928)? She was a leader of the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association. She was explicitly seeking reparations for slave labor exploitation but was sidelined through a trumped-up postal fraud lawsuit. Ultimately, she did not want charity, but fair treatment. She championed a class action lawsuit *Johnson v. McAdoo* which focused on receiving reparation from stolen labor – they did not win.



Our conversation around charity for disenfranchised people would look very different today had this movement been more successful. The lawsuit had made it to the supreme court only decades after slavery was abolished. It was not some theoretical discussion about reparations, but a 68-million-dollar question tied to real taxes and stolen labor.

Two Podcasts I want to pair two podcast from very different perspectives on a modern conversation about dignity which touches on reparations: Invisibilia's [“Eat The Rich”](#) and Reply All's [“The Least You Could Do”](#). I think both wrestle with what real dignity and financial freedom look like. In *Eat The Rich*, a DIY movement sprung up in Vermont to help the black community, they created a list of black people that people could give money to directly. They did not need to be poor or deserving, just black. Your reaction might at first be “ridiculous.”

But the one line of that show really stood out to me. It made me reconsider what charity and dignity could look like. The quote is from a person on the receiving end: *“It wasn't one of those things where it's like I felt like I had to be, like, groveling. I am genuinely grateful. But at the same time, like, you know, there was no pomp and circumstance to it at the expense of your dignity.”* Dignity is a filter that I want to get much better at using.

Then there is Reply All's “The Least You Could Do”, which had a very different take. After the murder of George Floyd, many white people were sending cash through Venmo their black friends as sort of guilt money. The logic was “you're black, here's \$20” which had the exact opposite intended effect. The black people were like...WTF?, and were insulted at the gift.

Generosity is not hard to calibrate but requires actual engagement with people. Dignity requires testing actions and reactions with real people, not charity-caricatures. The feeding of the 5000 is important for the many questions it raises about human dignity, God's power, and how we can share. -We have a baptism at 10 today and I will ask, “Will you respect the dignity of every human being?” We will with God's help.

Todd