

Feeding of the 5,000 Tony Hopkins

Almost surprisingly, only one of Jesus' miracles is recorded in all four Gospels: the feeding of the 5,000 (Mk 6:35-44; Mt 14:15-21; Lk 9:12-17; Jn 6:1-15). As is often the case when comparing Gospels, John's account is the most unique, so we will explore the Synoptic accounts together and then make some observations about the Johannine story.

The miracle in the Synoptics

In the Synoptics (Mt, Mk, Lk), the miracle follows two significant events: Jesus sending out the twelve (the word "apostle" literally means "the sent-out ones") and the death of John the Baptist. Each Gospel in its way suggests a need for Jesus and the disciples to withdraw, in part to grieve for John (Mt 14:13) but also for some needed rest after a period of ministry (Mk 6:31). By now, however, Jesus' reputation is widely known, and crowds are drawn to wherever he is; they hear or see where he is going to be, and they are waiting on him when he arrives. When Jesus sees the people, he has "compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk 6:34). The word for compassion is the same root word as "intestines"; the intestines functioned in their culture the way heart functions in our culture, as the seat of the most profound emotions. In response to his deep feelings of compassion—and as he does throughout the Gospels—Jesus both teaches (Mk 6:34; Lk 9:11) and heals (Mt 14:14; Lk 9:11).

We don't know at what time Jesus began teaching and healing, but his caring for the people stretches into evening. Pragmatically, the disciples suggest that Jesus send the people to find food. In a concise (terse?) way, Jesus offers what must have felt like an unrealistic challenge, or command, to the disciples: "*You* give them something to eat." In the Markan account, the disciples ask, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" (6:38). A denarius was a day's wage for a common laborer, so they're talking about *more than half a year's wages*. The crowd size has not yet been stated, so this is our first clue as to how large it is.

It then falls to the reader to supply the disciples' motivation (and perhaps the corresponding tone of voice). Are they trying to identify a plan which will allow them to comply with Jesus' instructions? Or is there some frustration (or even sarcasm) in their question, using it as indirect way of saying to Jesus, "You know good and well that we don't have that much money!" The implied conclusion is that Jesus is asking the impossible.

In Mk 6:38, Jesus says, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." Especially in Mk, the disciples often struggle to understand who Jesus is and/or what he is trying to teach them. Particularly in light of Mk's relatively harsh portrayal of the disciples, it's easy to find in Jesus' words a criticism, or corrective: "Don't discount something as impossible when you haven't even investigated what resources you have available"—and it's also easy to see that this corrective might often hold true for modern disciples.

The disciples return with requested information: they have five loaves and two fish. Jesus instructs the crowd to sit down in groups "on the green grass"—only Mk uses the adjective "green," a small detail which makes more vivid the reader's mental picture. The crowd is organized into groups of fifty and one hundred; if one

looked at the hillside from a distance, the crowd must have looked like a patchwork quilt.

Taking the fish and loaves, Jesus “looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to set before the people” (Mk 6:41). Notably, Mt, Mk, and Lk all use the same four verbs at this point in the story: *take, bless, break, give*. Readers of the Gospel will encounter those same four verbs, in the same order, when they come to the last supper: “he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them and said . . . ” (Mk 14:22).

Every Synoptic account notes a two-fold outcome: they “all ate” and they were all “satisfied,” or “filled.” Moreover, when the leftovers are gathered, they fill twelve baskets! As the reader tries to process the amazing scope of the miracle, only then does the writer mentioned that the crowd numbered five thousand. Mt clarifies that there were five thousand *men* (*andras* is a gender-specific term), “besides women and children” (14:21). Indeed, part of what makes the miracle so amazing is the abundance. In this regard, this Synoptic story recalls a Johannine saying: “I have come so that they might have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

As we reach the story’s end, the people have experienced at least three facets of Jesus’ compassionate ministry: they have been taught, they have been healed, and they have been fed. Note the parallels with the primary functions of a shepherd: the shepherd guides the sheep, the shepherd binds their wounds, and the shepherd feeds them. When the day began, the people were “like sheep without a shepherd”; now their needs have been wholistically met by the Good Shepherd.

The sign in the Gospel of John

Attentive readers will note how many details from the Synoptic accounts also show up in the Johannine story: Jesus, the disciples, a crowd of 5,000, five loaves and two fish, 200 denarii, sitting, eating, everyone filled, 12 baskets of leftovers. As usual, it is against the backdrop of the many *similarities* that we note distinctive features or additional info found in Jn.

Jn routinely refers to Jesus’ miracles as “signs,” and this one is no exception (6:14). In short, the signs in Jn always reveal something about the identity of Jesus, and if the reader gets caught up in the “wow” factor, she or he is missing the primary point—even when the wow factor is pronounced as it is here.

Jn also nuances the conversation about how much money it would take to feed the crowd:

⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

In Jn, Jesus never asks for information—because he already knows what’s going to happen. This bit of dialogue with Philip is consistent with that portrayal.

I also love that Jn tells us which disciple brings to Jesus the boy and his lunch: Andrew. Andrew appears three times in the Gospel of John, and each time, he brings someone to Jesus: his brother, Simon, in ch 1; the little boy with the lunch in ch 6; and the Gentiles (whose arrival sets in motion the fulfillment of Jesus’ “hour”) in ch 12. What a lovely way to be remembered, as one who brought others to Jesus!

Finally, it is Jn's account that provides a detail which so many of us remember from Sunday School: that the fish and loaves with which Jesus starts are offered to him by a little boy who was in the crowd. This endearing detail has often been used to make two points: (1) you're never too young to be used by God, and (2) if you offer what you have to Jesus (even if it seems meager to you), there's no way to know what he can do with it. These two lessons have been taught so many times because they are perfectly illustrated in the story and because they are timelessly true.

Inside and outside the narrative world

When we read the Gospels, there are always two interactions which are taking place simultaneously. Within the world of the narrative, Jesus is interacting with the other characters in the Gospels. As he does so, his words and actions are intended to help others learn about God and participate in God's kingdom. At the very same time, however, there is another dialogue taking place outside of the narrative world: the Gospel writers are talking to *us*. Their goals parallel the goals of Jesus: they (the Gospel writers) want to help us know Jesus—and they want to convince us that following him is the best way to fulfill God's purpose for our lives. Consider, then, what the Gospel writers have helped us see in this one story.

- Jesus is both powerful and compassionate.
- He teaches about God with his words and reveals God with his actions.
- He is both announcing the kingdom's arrival and setting the kingdom in motion.
- He teaches our minds, feeds our hunger, heals our hurts, and brings wholeness to our spirits.

Like the disciples (especially in Mk 😊), we don't fully understand; but we are beginning to see that this Jesus has both the desire and the ability to connect us to God and to help us fulfill the purpose for which we were created.