

“Empowered, Rather than Rewarded” based on Matthew 14:13-21

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, August 6, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

In our gospel today, Jesus is mourning the loss of his cousin and he just wants to be alone. In that moment, he withdraws, taking the boat to a secluded place. But the people followed him on foot, and there was a massive crowd. Indeed, Matthew says there were 5,000 men, plus women and children. They refuse to leave Jesus alone, because he is their only hope. They go to him, and he comes out to see them. Looking at them, he is moved with compassion for them, and he responds to them, by serving all, healing those among them who are sick.

All four gospels record the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with two fish and five loaves of bread. Apart from the resurrection, it is the only miracle common to all four gospels. Now, I want you to imagine this scene right now. Think about what it looked like? What do you imagine? Where do you see Jesus in the story? Where are the disciples? Where is the crowd? Where are you if you put yourself in the story? What does it look like? What is it like in our modern world?

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I think we often imagine this story as one where Jesus is teaching all day, and he is just so interesting that it causes everyone to lose track of time. It's easy to imagine an ancient stadium setting, where Jesus is preaching a whole lot, and mixed in, someone comes up to be healed and everyone watches. They are enthralled by the spectacle of a miracle right before their eyes. In this image, Jesus is stationary, up at the front. Perhaps the disciples are like ushers at a concert, managing the crowd, maybe even taking requests – *“Oh, yours is an interesting case. Let's get you up front right away. Everyone's going to want to see this healing.”*

Did you picture it this way? If I'm honest, I did. Really, I always have imagined it, quite similar to what I described, except for the showbiz talk from the disciples. Yet, in re-encountering this familiar story, I read through the four versions this week. I found it is only in Mark where it says that Jesus only taught. Luke says he taught and healed, while Matthew and John say only that he healed people. Yet neither Mark nor Luke indicate it was a speech, as they record no teachings. None of the accounts detail any aspect of Jesus's speech to the crowd. None of the accounts describe Jesus at the front of a venue, giving a rousing speech to an enthralled congregation.

Reading this, now take a moment to imagine it again. What do you see? Now, I see this story as more like a hospital with many rooms, or better still, a refugee site, where Jesus is not standing in one place but going through the crowd seeing people. In each pocket of people, he answers their questions, teaching them his “good news” or gospel, and healing those who were sick, making each one whole again in him.

The people came to him, but now he has come out and goes to them. That is the self-giving nature of God's love. It is to seek encounters, to come out to us, and to meet us where we are. When we are in need and seek God in prayer, know that God is already coming to us. God is already coming out to hear us. God is already coming toward us to answer us with love and grace.

Seeing it this way, may also change how we perceive the miracle of feeding this crowd. They are not distracted by a speech, or the spectacle of every healing done up front. No, they are waiting, either because they have not yet seen Jesus up close, or they are unwilling to leave, wanting to

remain in this place of joy. Either way, in my experience, waiting around only increases hunger. Once you have that thought of hunger set it, it's hard to distract yourself. The disciples sense this. They want to call it a day and say "were done." When they say, "The hour has gone by already," they mean, "We are done here. Let's go." They figure the people have already come, they've been healed, and can get their own food.

But Jesus says, "They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat." Jesus challenges the disciples to fulfill the need they recognize all around them. He tells his chosen few in that moment, "Ok, you see a need, great. Now go and do something about it. Take care of it."

I'll ask you again, Where do you see yourself in this story when you hear it? Are you in the crowd? Are you one of the many in need of healing? Are you tired? Are you hungry? Jesus is not standing in the distance, with a crowd of people between you and him. You do not need to tell a compelling version of your troubles to be noticed by God. You do not need to earn your way to the front. God sees you, regardless of what you do for God's attention. Come to him, and he will meet you where you are. His attention is not a reward, but love in action, empowering you to endure in hope.

Maybe you are doing ok right now, and you have imagined yourself as one of the disciples. You have interceded on behalf of the people. I say to all those who pray, "You pray for people, and that is good. Yet, how often do we pray for people, and then feel like we've done our part? Like we've told Jesus and now we are no longer involved. How often do we pray, and ignore Jesus telling us to do something about it? How often do we say that we do not have the resources to help? I know that I am guilty of this as much as anyone else. And yet, Jesus is saying, "Bring what you have to me."

Jesus wants us to give what we do have, to share and let what we share, be multiplied by him, by God – For whatever is shared, is multiplied. The disciples are next to Jesus – they are relatively comfortable, safe place in his presence. But this is not a reward for their faith. They may feast and drink with the bridegroom, but it is not of their own merit. These are mere fishermen and tax collectors, who are now vagrants.

Likewise, our faith and comfort with our belief, even our comfort in life, none of this is given to us as a reward for something we have done. No, all of this is given to empower us, to send us out, to answer Jesus's call to give them something to eat and offer up whatever it is we can give. Our prayers may be, for some, all that you can give and I'm thankful for those who pray a lot. For most of us, there is more. You have reason to pray for someone, for some issue, for some crisis. It is good to pray for all of those things, but be moved by your prayer, by hearing the one who comes to you in your prayer. Hear his voice, "Don't send them away. You give them something."

Today, Bly and Charlie will be received by you all as members of this congregation. We call them confirmands, and on this day, they confirm their faith in Jesus Christ. Each of them has written a statement of faith and shared it with our session. They have done this after six months or more of meeting with me to ask questions, to learn, and to wrestle with the challenge of faith. It's an arduous process because it is not one to be taken lightly. At their age, it's easy for confirmation to be about fulfilling a parent's wish. What it should be is an expression of their own faith.

But this isn't a rite of passage, accomplishment, or completion of some duty. It's not a reward. It too is an empowerment, for these young men to find themselves in this story. The story of God's work in this world, of God's love for them and for the world. You are confirmed today – that's great,

but now what? If you now walk away from your faith, if you find another story to grip you, what does it say about the time you spent learning? What does it say about the time you spent contemplating this moment?

I'm not just talking to the confirmands though, but all of us. That's because for all of us, this is the moment to recognize that your faith is not some rational argument, but the crazy belief that the God who made all things loves you and pursues you, knows you by name. God knows you as an individual and wants to empower you so that the love you receive will be freely shared with others. We recognize that there is still much to be done in this world, and Jesus says to you, "You give them something to eat. You do something about the injustice you see. You do something about the problems of this world."

But you do not do it alone but with the Son, who will multiply your work. No, you do it with the presence of the Holy Spirit of God, which is in you and among us all here in the church, in this community of Jesus Christ, who despite being greater than us all, equal to God, the eternal Son of God, shared in your life, your limits, your flesh, to live, die and rise for you. It is him, with whom you are to work, sharing what you have to give, because you are now a disciple, empowered to reveal Christ. Indeed, this is as the prophet Isaiah in the vision of the new creation – Let all come without money, without price, to drink of the water, the milk, which are the salvation of our God. Amen.