Words about Words — from God

A Picnic to Remember — Matthew 14:13-21

No Distinction — Romans 10:5-15

What about Israel? — Romans 11:1-32

Everyone Is Gifted — Romans 12:1-8

A Labor of Love — Romans 12:9-21

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[Note to the teacher: Today, I am offering two lesson plans. The first (and the one I will use as I teach this lesson) is based on a spiritual exercise called “Holy Reading” (in Latin, “Lectio Divina”). The second lesson plan follows the typical FIT Faith model.]

**Before the Lesson:** Choose your lesson plan. Prepare one copy of the handout for that plan for each participant. In Option One, the handout will be used for the reflection time after each of the three readings are completed. For Option Two, the handout will be used in the Transformational Exercise. Have pens/pencils for the students, as well.

**Fellowship Question**

Use one of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

When is the last time you went on a picnic?

Do you have a “family story” that gets retold? Can you share it with us?

**Information**

There are some family stories that get retold. In my family, there was the time we took Dad, who lived in a wheelchair, bowling for his birthday; the time Mom passed out at their 50th Anniversary celebration; the time the marshmallows caught fire in the oven at my sister’s house. Although the same people were present when the event occurred, each of us would share it in a different way.

In today’s text, thousands of people join a spontaneous picnic. You have probably heard this story many times. Actually, it is the only miracle story (besides the resurrection) that is told in all four gospels, so of course is told in four different ways.

We will look more closely at Matthew’s telling of the story in a minute. But first, this question: Why do you think every gospel writer felt this story needed to be told?

Before we read the story, let’s keep in mind the context. The story just before this event was the tragic event of John the Baptist’s beheading. John was Jesus’ cousin and gave Jesus his public ministry entrée. You can imagine how Jesus was feeling as he dealt with this very personal grief.
Information continued

[Have a class member read Matthew 14:13-16.]

What is going on within Jesus in verse 13? (grief, exhaustion, etc.) When you feel this spent, what do you do for refreshment?

Jesus wanted to get away from people, but people wanted to be with Jesus. We've probably all been there — we just want a deserted place. This was before the days of bubble baths, but there was a boat, so Jesus got in it. Surprisingly, when the boat reached the other shore, there were the people — again! One commentator says that the first miracle in this story is Jesus’ attitude. How does he react to the sight of all these needy people?

The Bible lesson writer notes, “For Jesus, compassion was not just something one feels, but something one does, even when tired.” Have you ever had tugs of compassion, but not acted on it? Why do you think we do this?

There is a second miracle. Jesus heals the sick. We are given no details about this. We have no further stories. For some people, this was the day that changed their lives — the day they were healed! What does this tell us about the Bible’s accounts of Jesus’ miracles? (Many, maybe most, are not recorded; the gospel writers were selective in which stories they told; etc.)

This has been a big day. Imagine being present as Jesus heals person after person. What is the disciples’ response? (“Lord, send them away!”) What does this say about our walk of faith? (God is at work, but our exhaustion blinds us; we can have “compassion fatigue”; our will is not God’s will; we always have lessons to learn, etc.)

We have heard this story so many times, Jesus’ words to his disciples no longer shock us. We know what is about to come up. But put yourself back into the story before there was the feeding miracle. Jesus tells you, “You, feed this multitude.” How would you react?

Could Jesus have simply fed the people without involving the disciples? (Yes; in Jesus’ temptations, even the devil believed Jesus could turn stones into bread — did the devil have more faith in Jesus miraculous power than the disciples???) Yet Jesus challenges his followers. What does this tell us about our walk of faith?

[Have a class member read Matthew 14:17-19.]

Where did the disciples find the bread and fish? That was kind of a trick question. Matthew does not tell us about the small boy. (Only John’s account mentions the boy.) For Matthew, then, the point was not the source of the food. What was the point? (the size of the portions; the disciples were not completely empty handed; the disciples’ common sense made sense, etc.)

Many scholars note that the words Matthew uses here are also used to describe the Lord’s Supper: he broke, he blessed, he gave. This is “a striking preview of the last meal...
he would share prior to the crucifixion.” [Quote is from the online resource “Digging Deeper — The original Lord's Supper?”] What do you think Matthews point would be in tying these two events together?

The disciples took what Jesus blessed and shared it with others. A common phrase heard in offertory prayers asks God to multiply these gifts. What does this story have to teach us about our personal stewardship of the “loaves and fishes” God has given us?

[Have a class member read Matthew 14:20-21.]

Twelve baskets of leftover food. Twelve disciples. Is this mere coincidence, or can we think of a symbolic meaning?

At the very end of the story, Matthew tells us how many were fed. Of course, this is not an exact count of the men. And, adding women and children to the number fed would probably triple, at least, the count. What does this tell us about our compulsiveness about attendance numbers?

Transformational Exercise

In verse 18, we read a powerful word from Jesus. What does Jesus say? (“Bring them here to me.”)

[Distribute the handout.]

I want us to consider the resources we have. Few of us have a million dollars in the bank, but we have something. Few of us are Fulbright Scholars, but we have some knowledge about some subjects. Few of us are models of perfect health, but we have enough to make it here today.

Most of us may not have all the resources we might want, but we have some “loaves” and some “fish.”

In the next few minutes, consider the loaves and fishes you have. How are you doing as a steward of those resources? How are you doing as one who shares their loaves and fish?

Jesus did not scoff at the little that the disciples had. What does this say to us about the limitations we may feel we have?

[After some time for silent reflect and journaling, close in a prayer something like this: “Lord, we thought we knew this story, but we are still learning lessons from it. Help us to be bold to share the resources we have so that your children may be fed physically and spiritually. Amen.”]

Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan? You may send comments to the lesson plan author at rjordan@cbfnec.org. Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.
A deserted place — The traditional site of Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and fish is at Tabgha, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, not far from the village of Capernaum. In the picture below, the Church of St. Peter’s Primacy is the gray stone building at right. The roof of the Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes is seen at left. Beneath the altar of the church is a fifth century mosaic showing a small basket of loaves and two fish.

Sheep without a shepherd — Matthew typically abbreviates the stories taken from Mark, often by about one-third. Matthew noted that Jesus was “moved with compassion” by the crowd (v. 14), but did not include Mark’s comment that “they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). Perhaps Matthew omitted that line here because he had already used a similar expression in Matt. 9:36.

Fish — The most common commercial fish in the Sea of Galilee were a type of tilapia known locally as “St. Peter’s Fish.” These were typically hand-size, or larger. Sardines were also commonly caught. Their smaller size made them easy to preserve by drying and salting.

Small groups — Matthew omits Mark’s observation that Jesus told the disciples to arrange the thousands of people in groups of fifties and hundreds (Mark 6:39-40), saying only that Jesus ordered the crowd to sit on the grass (Matt. 14:19a). Perhaps the author’s purpose is to leave out extraneous material and sharpen the focus on Jesus.

What, no fish? — After saying that Jesus took the bread and fish in his hands, Matthew loses interest in the fish, saying only that Jesus “broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds” (v. 19b). The other gospels
continue to include the fish, though almost as an afterthought.

The original Lord’s Supper? — Writers often note similarities between the feeding of the 5,000 and the Last Supper. The fish play a very minor role in the story, for example, while bread — especially Jesus’ breaking of the bread — is front and center.

Furthermore, the sequence of verbs used — “he took,” “he blessed,” “he broke,” “he gave” — is precisely the same as in the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26-27).

Even with the absence of wine, the similarity in the way Jesus is said to have taken, blessed, broken, and shared the bread is a striking preview of the last meal he would share prior to the crucifixion.

The manner of the miracle — None of the gospels explain how the miracle took place, only that Jesus broke the bread and fish before giving it to the disciples, who distributed it to the people, and that there were 12 baskets of leftovers.

Some writers have speculated that the miracle was not really one of multiplication, but of sharing. In their view, the people in the crowd had food with them, but had kept quiet when the disciples asked for potential supplies. After hearing Jesus pray and seeing him set the example, however, they furtively brought out and shared the bread and fish they had brought, so that there was enough, and more than enough.

Such an explanation robs the story of its power. The whole point of the story is that Jesus is the Messiah who provides bread in the wilderness, even as God had provided manna for the Israelites. The 12 baskets of leftovers is more than an indication that each disciple returned with a full basket. It is probably intended to symbolize the 12 tribes of Israel.

Donald A. Hagner argues that the feeding of the 5,000 is designed to show that Christ came first to the Jews, as the fulfillment of their messianic hopes, while the feeding of the 4,000 in Matt. 15:32-38 demonstrates the extension of Jesus’ provision to the Gentiles. In that story, the word for “basket” is a word typically used by Greeks, and the leftovers fill seven baskets, symbolizing Christ’s provision for all nations. (*Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 33b [Word Books, 1995], 419, 452).
The Hardest Question
by Tony Cartlege

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Why are the gospels so different?

With this study, as in other studies of the gospels, we take note of ways in which Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the story of Jesus in ways that are both similar and different.

Even a surface reading shows that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are quite similar at many points, and they are called the “synoptic gospels” because of this (“synoptic” is from Greek, and means “seen together”).

A few scholars have argued that Matthew was written first, and that Mark and Luke abbreviated what was found there. Most scholars, however, agree that Mark, the shortest of the gospels, was written first. Part of the evidence for this is that when Matthew and Luke include stories that follow the same order, it is those sections that they have in common with Mark.

It is commonly thought that the gospel of Mark reflects the memories of the Apostle Peter, with whom Mark worked. The author of Matthew may have been the apostle, or someone writing in his name. We know Luke as the author of both Luke and Acts. He was a Gentile physician who had come to know Christ and sought to gain as much information as he could before writing his books, which were addressed to “Theophilus,” which means “lover of God.”

It seems evident that the authors of both Matthew and Luke had access to Mark’s gospel, and included much of its material in their books, often in a slightly abbreviated form, or shaped to emphasize their personal interests: some believe Matthew was writing mainly to a Jewish audience, while Luke wrote for other Gentiles. Luke’s gospel also gives extra attention to the role of women and to those who are sick or poor.

Matthew and Luke also share a number of Jesus’ teachings in common that are not in Mark. This material is often attributed to an otherwise unknown collection of Jesus’ “sayings” that scholars call “Q” (from “Quelle,” a German word meaning “source”).

In addition, both Matthew and Luke incorporate unique materials not included elsewhere, notably their separate narratives about the birth and infancy of Jesus: Matthew has more to say about Joseph’s place in the story, while Luke focuses more on Mary. Both Matthew and Luke sometimes mix and match their various materials in different ways.
Thus, Matthew is thought to consist mainly of material from Mark, Q, and Matthew’s distinctive source, while Luke consists of material from Mark, Q, and Luke’s separate source.

John’s gospel, which reflects a more philosophical approach and a more developed Christology than the synoptics, shows relatively little dependence on them. It was probably written toward the end of the first century, somewhat later than the synoptics, which are often dated to around 60-90 CE.

The many differences between John and the synoptics make it all the more remarkable that the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 appears in it, too: it is the only Galilean miracle of Jesus that occurs in all four gospels.
Holy Reading of Matthew 14:13-21

After the first reading:
What did you hear that you’ve not heard in this story before?

After the second reading:
How were you able to live into this story? (senses, emotions, thoughts, etc.)

Did you choose a character to live through? If so, who?

After the third reading:
What word, phrase or image “called” to you for further reflection?

Why is this word significant to you today?

What is it that God wants to say to you today in this text?

What insights did you gain through this exercise?
“Bring them here to me.” Matthew 14:18

Consider and jot down some resources you have. Some categories are suggested below, but do not limit yourself to these categories:

- Health
- Skills
- Education
- Ability to work with people
- Ability to work with things
- Ability to work with ideas
- Money
- Other material wealth
- Other resources

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