

## SERMON NOTES

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost  
(Eve of the Fast of Transfiguration)

Synaxis Gospel  
Matthew 14:13-21

### THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

#### INTRODUCTION

Matthew has given us a slightly different perspective on one of Jesus' more famous miracles, the feeding of the five thousand.<sup>1</sup> But to understand this perspective, we need to see the context: Jesus had just suffered a death in His family; His cousin John had been executed by the tetrarch Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee.<sup>2</sup>

John was the cousin of Jesus, but he is more famous as John the Baptist. His birth was something of a miracle. Elizabeth, Mary's relative, was a barren woman, old and well beyond the years for childbearing. Her husband, Zacharias, was a Levitical priest which meant that she was probably from the Levitical family herself. The high angel Gabriel announced to Zacharias—who was serving his term in the Temple at the time—that Elizabeth would give birth to a son. When she did, he was to be named John, and reared in a special way that meant he was never to drink wine or strong drink, and possibly meant that his hair was never cut.<sup>3</sup>

John had been chosen by God for a special service. In the Old Testament it was prophesied that, before the coming of the Messiah (the Christ, the great promised king), the prophet Elijah would return to prepare His way.<sup>4</sup> John was, in a spiritual sense, to be Elijah.<sup>5</sup> He grew up in the desert and may never have met his cousin until Jesus came to be baptized.

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<sup>1</sup> All four of the Gospel writers have included this miracle in their accounts: Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6: 1-13. In the context of them all, there is always a reference to John the Baptist's death (very subtly in the Gospel of John), but only Matthew draws a direct connection between John's death and this miracle. In Mark and Luke, one might conclude that it was the activity of the disciples, sent out with power that caused Herod to remember his killing of John the Baptist. But looking carefully, one sees that, on the contrary, it was the activity of Jesus Himself that caused Herod's anxiety. Perhaps this very miracle was recorded as a flash-back to indicate the cause of Herod's concern.

<sup>2</sup> Herod the Tetrarch, also known as Herod Antipas, was the son of Herod the Great (the king at the time of Jesus' birth), and had been appointed the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea upon his father's death. His brother, Philip, became tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and another brother, Archelaus became ethnarch of Judaea.

<sup>3</sup> For the complete history of John's birth see Luke 1:5-80

<sup>4</sup> Malachi 3:1; 4:4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:14; 17:10-13

Like Elijah, John wore a garment of camel skin. He lived on locusts and wild honey. John preached a message of repentance to the people, and began baptizing those who repented and turned from their wicked ways. In this way, John prepared a people who were willing to accept God's purpose for their lives. He thus prepared the way for Jesus and His message of forgiveness and love.

However, in preaching the need for repentance, John was outspoken against the sins of the people. He made a great enemy of the tetrarch's wife, Herodias. The marriage of the royal pair, Herod Antipas and Herodias, was illegal by Jewish law, for Herodias had formerly been the wife of her husband's still living brother, Herod III.<sup>6</sup> She had left that brother for Herod's brother Philip the tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis. Upon her second husband's death, she had married this brother, Herod Antipas. Because John denounced this adulterous and incestuous liaison, Herodias was determined to have John killed. However, all the tetrarch Herod Antipas dared to do was to imprison John, because all the people held John to be a prophet of God.

The wicked queen finally succeeded in her plan when at his birthday party, in front of all his guests, Herod Antipas promised to reward her daughter with anything the girl wanted, because she had danced so beautifully. Herodias urged her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist. So, John's earthly life came to a violent end.

The people held John to be a prophet, but Jesus said that John was much more than a prophet, for he was that one chosen to announce the coming of the Christ.<sup>7</sup> John had seen the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus when he had baptized Him.<sup>8</sup> From that moment on, John understood that Jesus was the sacrificial "Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."<sup>9</sup> John had proclaimed this to all those who came out to hear him and be baptized. His death must have caused Jesus deep grief.

From the other Gospels, we learn that His disciples had just returned to Jesus from a preaching tour and were giving their report when, as Matthew records in the verses preceding our reading:

*"And he [Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch] sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother. And his [John's] disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and they went and reported to Jesus."<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of these marriages, see Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) pp. 134-36.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 11:9-10

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 3:16

<sup>9</sup> John 1:29, 36

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 14:10-12

Our Synaxis reading joins the story at this point.

## SYNTAXIS READING

Matthew 14:13-21

*Now when Jesus heard it, He withdrew from there in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities.*

*And when he went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick.*

*And when it was evening, the disciples came to Him, saying, "The place is desolate, and the time is already past; so send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."*

*But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!"*

*And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."*

*And He said to them, "Bring them here to Me."*

*And ordering the multitudes to recline on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave to the multitudes, and they all ate, and were satisfied.*

*And they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets.*

*And there were about five thousand men who ate aside from women and children.*

## NOTES

Now when Jesus heard it, He withdrew from there in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities.

What did He hear? John's disciples, after burying the body, brought word to Jesus of John's execution.

As we shall see, “to a lonely place by Himself” did not mean that the disciples were left behind. Jesus reacted to this news in the same way we do. He wanted to be alone in His grief, with only His dear friends near Him. No doubt He wanted to pray.

Moreover, the disciples of Jesus, some of whom were former disciples of John the Baptist,<sup>11</sup> must have been badly shaken at the news of their former master’s death. How they must have needed the comfort that only God can give.

The crowds have heard as well. It is not clear whether they have heard of the death of John or the departure of Jesus. Perhaps it was both. The people considered John to be a prophet.<sup>12</sup> They had not had a prophet for hundreds of years, and the news of John’s violent death was no doubt devastating for them, especially for those who had been baptized by John. In this tragic hour of pain and loss, and perhaps feeling forsaken by God, they turn to the one John had pointed them to, the Lamb of God.<sup>13</sup>

The crowds apparently knew the shore to which the boat carrying Jesus and the disciples was heading, and they ran ahead, around the shoreline, to meet the boat.

**And when he went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick.**

Jesus knew their pain and reached out to them. They must have felt reassured when God’s power was once again displayed among them.

**And when it was evening, the disciples came to Him, saying, “The place is desolate, and the time is already past; so send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”**

Then a problem arose: the long day of teaching and healing stretched out until evening. The huge crowd needed food. Jesus and His disciples did not have enough food for the massive throngs of people.

The disciples suggested the only logical solution: send the crowds away to the villages where they could obtain food.

**But Jesus said to them, “They do not need to go away;**

We all know that, during a period of sorrow and grief, we offer food to those who come to mourn with us. Eating together, somehow, unites us in spirit, and creates a family-like atmosphere between the participants. In sharing food, we share in each other. This supportive unity consoles and strengthens us after experiencing strong emotions that leave us weak and exhausted.

The people in this account are in need. In this moment, Jesus will supply all that is needed to comfort and console; they do not need to seek it elsewhere. They can dine with God.

**You give them something to eat!”**

Jesus commanded His grieving disciples to serve others. Moreover, He commanded them to serve in a way quite impossible.

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<sup>11</sup> John (unnamed in his Gospel) and Andrew, see John 1:35-40.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 14:5

<sup>13</sup> John 1:29-36

And they said to Him, “We have here only five loaves and two fish.”<sup>14</sup>

The impossibility of fulfilling the command was demonstrated by reviewing their meager resources. If they had accepted the only food available (belonging to a boy in the crowd), they did not even have enough for Jesus and the disciples to each have more than a snack. How could they feed this crowd of perhaps fifteen to thirty thousand people?

The loaves of bread were rounds of pita-like bread.

And He said to them, “Bring them here to Me.”

To be effective, the completely insufficient resources must be brought to Jesus.

And ordering the multitudes to recline on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave to the multitudes,

The multitudes would have expected to be fed when they were told at that late hour to sit down (in those days, reclining was the position assumed to eat).

He blessed the food not only in thanks to God for His provision, but also to demonstrate the source of the miracle that was about to occur. Jesus did nothing except what was done through the power of His Father.

Jesus gave the disciples the blessed food. He thereby enabled them to fulfill His *impossible* command to feed the people.

and they all ate, and were satisfied. And they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. And there were about five thousand men who ate, aside from women and children.

The sheer magnitude of the miracle is seen in the number of people who ate and *were satisfied*: five thousand men plus the women and children. There were at least triple the number of men who ate. The physical needs of all those people were completely met.

After obeying Jesus, the disciples found that, instead of the few bites they had started out with, they each had a full basketful of leftovers—much more than they could eat.

## APPLICATION

All of us face deep sorrows in this life. In the shock that accompanies those dark hours, we feel lost, and the world around us seems somehow unreal. Our sense of security and wellbeing is gone. Friends try to help, but there are no words to relieve the terrible pain and bewilderment. Our friends are as helpless as we are.

However, our God has all power, and when we run to him, even in that desolate place, we can trust Him to care for us. He sorrows with us, and understands our deepest grief. Our all-powerful God truly loves us, and will provide all that we need.

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<sup>14</sup> John records that the five loaves and two fish were actually those offered by a little boy in the crowd. John 6:9.

Notice how Jesus reacted to the tragic death of His beloved cousin, John the Baptist. He wanted to be alone to pray to His Father in Heaven. How do we react to news of a tragic death in our family? Sometimes we just want to get away from everybody and be alone in the grief that overwhelms us. In the grips of shock and bewilderment, we can think of nothing and no one, except the loss of our dear one. Jesus, Who knows everything, must not have been shocked by Herod's killing of John; but I believe His heart was as heavy as ours is in a death situation.

Jesus felt the need to be alone with His Father; so He left in a boat to go to a lonely place. The disciples no doubt were with Jesus, but Matthew does not say so. That fact is not what Matthew wished to emphasize. The important point was that Jesus desired solitude.

But Jesus was not to be allowed this private time in His hour of sorrow. The people guessed where Jesus was heading, and so, they ran around on foot and were waiting for Him when the boat landed. What was Jesus reaction to this denial of His time of solitude? What would our reaction have been? Anger? Frustration? Would we have rowed the boat out into the middle of the lake and just sat there? Or would we have felt a great love for the people?

This people had just experienced the trauma of losing a prophet of God—the first prophet God had granted them in hundreds of years—at the hands of an evil king. Such seeming victories of evil often cause people to feel God-forsaken and helpless, and they question, “But where is God? Why didn't He . . .?”

Our reading says that Jesus felt a great compassion for the people. God is characterized by compassion for the world. Those who follow Jesus are sent by Him to show compassion as well. It is at the foundation of our mission. Jesus' mission as the incarnate God of compassion, though it meant His own death, was to provide the way for people to come back to our loving Father. So Jesus, laying aside the needs of His human self, stepped out of the boat, and began healing their sick. God was in their midst.

The disciples began to be concerned as the evening drew near. What were all those thousands of people going to do for food? So they suggested to Jesus that He send the crowds away to the villages, so that they could purchase something to eat. You can imagine the disciples' shock when Jesus, not willing to send the crowds away, told them, “No, *you* feed them!”

How were the disciples supposed to do that? There were more than fifteen-thousand hungry people in that crowd. A quick tally of their resources came up with only five rounds of pita-like bread and two small fish. Not even enough for the disciples, let alone that huge crowd. It was an impossible request! But Jesus had something for the disciples to learn. As St. Paul later would put it, “I can do all things through Christ, Who strengthens me.”<sup>15</sup> God never asks us to do something that He does not give us the power to do. But we must depend upon Him.

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<sup>15</sup> Philippians 4:13

Now there are many things that we might like to do that are impossible. I'm sure you could think of one or two. God has not promised to give us the power to do what we might dream of doing, but He has promised to give us the power to do all that He commands. He has commanded us to show forth His character of love and forgiveness, He wants us to feed those who are hungry for God. So, to teach the disciples that God gives the power to do His will, Jesus asked the disciples to bring that little bit of food to Him.

Do we have just a little bit of faith, just a little bit of knowledge, just a little bit of love? Just a little bit, not nearly enough of whatever it takes to do what Christ is asking us to do? Jesus says, "Bring your little bit to Me."

So the disciples brought those two fish and five rounds of bread to Jesus. Then, Jesus directed that that huge crowd should recline in the dining position on the grass. The people were hungry, and now they were expecting to be fed. The suspense must have been great. Do you think the disciples, standing there with their little bit of food, felt nervous—that Jesus had put them in an impossible situation? Without Jesus, it was an impossible position; but Jesus was there.

Then Jesus took the food and blessed it. And then he began to break the food into pieces, and gave them to the disciples to carry to the people. He kept breaking and breaking and breaking, and there was always more bread and fish to break, until all those people were fed. And they were not fed a little; they were fed plenty. When they finished eating, the disciples picked up the leftovers—twelve baskets full of the pieces. Each disciple had a basketful.

In the beginning, dividing five loaves and two fishes among themselves and the little boy, each disciple's portion might have been less than one-half of a round of bread and a few bites of fish—hardly a meal. Now, after sharing the meager resources with all those people, each disciple had a basketful of bread and fish. What a feast!

What do we learn from this event? God never asks us to do something that He will not give us the power to do. Actually, He will be doing all the work; we just need to deliver. We should not be faint-hearted because we know that we do not have what it takes. God will take whatever little bit we may have in ability or resources, and in His hands it will be more than enough for the job. Finally, when the job is done, we will discover that He has given back to us a tremendous blessing—far more than we had before.

There is another fact we need to consider about this lesson. We mentioned the human grief Jesus must have felt at the violent death of John the Baptist. We said nothing about the feelings of Jesus' disciples. Some of them had been John the Baptist's disciples, before John had pointed them to Jesus. How must *they* have felt at the news of John's death? Surely they were saddened and shaken. Perhaps that is why Jesus had taken them with Him to be alone for awhile.

Yet, when Jesus responded with loving compassion to the crowd, the disciples had to join Him in His work. In joining in Jesus' work they learned a great lesson. They learned that even with a heart laden with sorrow, a situation that normally drains us of the will to interact with others, Jesus gives us the power to do whatever He asks of us. With Him, all things are possible.

May we look to Him at all times, especially in our hour of sorrow, to give us the power to serve Him as He directs. If we do, He will teach us that He is sufficient for all our needs, and He will abundantly bless us.