

*Gracious God, you anticipate our needs and fill them before we ask. Help us recognize your work in our lives, and show your love to others. Amen.*

Today's Bible story is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels.

Many of our favorite stories about Jesus are only included in one or two of the Gospels. Even Jesus' birth is only recorded in Luke and Matthew.

The raising of Lazarus is only in John, Zacchaeus is only in Luke, and the separating of the sheep and goats is only in Matthew.

The fact that the feeding of 5000 men is told by all four Gospel writers means that it teaches us something important about Jesus – something that ought not to be missed. It's right up there with the baptism of Jesus, his betrayal, death, and resurrection. These are the stories that frame his ministry.

Before we get into the meaning of the story, though, let's do a little renaming.

This Bible passage only counts men. But we can assume that there were women and children present, as there would have been in any crowd of people.

In fact, women were likely to be at home with their children in the towns where Jesus and the disciples were spotted, while men may have been traveling to larger cities for work, or out in the fields farming or shepherding. It's entirely possible that women and children outnumbered the men.

Jesus miraculously fed at least 8,000 people in that deserted place, and it might have been 12,000 or more! For simplicity, I'm going to call this story the feeding of the 10,000.

OK, then, on to the meaning behind the story. Or, rather, meanings. As with any Bible story, there is always more than one way to understand it.

Let's look first at the phrase, "he had compassion for them."

Jesus and the disciples traveled to a place they thought would be deserted, where they could get a little renewal. But when they arrived, they found crowds of people, who were in need of the renewal that only Jesus can give.

He saw that the people who were following him had a need, and he responded.

According to the story, Jesus didn't wait for them to ask for teaching – he could feel their curiosity, and he fed it with his wisdom.

Then, when it got to be late, it was clear to everyone that there was a need for food.

Jesus didn't wait for the people to ask him for food. The disciples asked, but they stated the need on behalf of the crowds, not for themselves. Jesus and the disciples anticipated what the people would require, and provided for it.

Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. They were full of life and curiosity, but needed some direction.

They were like people without a leader. A shepherd is often used as an analogy for a king in biblical writings. So, Jesus saw these people and realized they were looking for a strong leader, and none of the folks they knew in positions of leadership could adequately fill the role. But he could.

And so he did what any good leader would do. He saw the people for who they were – recognized their humanity and their basic needs – and he had compassion. He acted to fill those needs.

The meal that Jesus offered was condition-free. He didn't set requirements of income or employment or religion or nationality or criminal record or legal status. Jesus simply offered his Word and some food to anyone who was there.

Bible scholars call stories like this one “gift miracles.” Something tangible is freely given, without anyone requesting it, but with God simply offering what is needed.

Consistent with what the people had come to expect of God, Jesus was indeed a good shepherd, a righteous ruler, and a good example for us to follow. His unconditional love and grace demonstrated his leadership.

Jesus had compassion for the people in the crowds.

But when the disciples asked how they were going to feed so many people, Jesus surprised them.

“You give them something to eat.”

Can you imagine the shock on the disciples' faces?! They didn't have the ability to meet all of the need that they saw. They didn't even think that Jesus had the ability to do it – that's why they asked him to send the people away to the neighboring towns to eat.

But Jesus had faith in them even when they doubted themselves.

Jesus may have been the one to bless the bread and direct his followers, but the miraculous feeding of 10,000 actually came about through the hands and actions of the disciples.

Jesus used the service of others to make his grace and love and power be known, and multiplied.

Some of you have probably heard the quote from Pope Francis:

“You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works.”

God uses our hands, just as Jesus used the disciples', to perform miracles. When we take the bread and the fish, and distribute them to the masses, then God can do miraculous things with that food.

But if we keep the food all to ourselves, paralyzed by doubt and fear, then God can never miraculously multiply it to feed the gathered people.

The first step in the feeding of the 10,000 was the disciples relinquishing their mindset of scarcity, and taking the risk of handing out that first bit of food to someone.

A colleague posted a poignant quote online yesterday:

“I screamed at God for the starving child, until I saw that the starving child was God screaming at me.”

When someone is in need, that person reflects God to us, calling us to action. Our faithful response is to spring into action like the disciples did.

This is how God has always worked.

Joseph saved his brothers from famine.

Miriam and the Hebrew midwives saved Moses and many other young boys from death at the hands of Pharaoh.

Moses, in turn, parted the sea and led the people out of slavery.

Jael killed a military foe to ensure the safety of God's chosen people.

Elisha fed a hundred people with just twenty barley loaves.

And the disciples of Jesus fed 10,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish.

Obviously God was behind all of these things. But God worked the miracle through human actions.

The followers of Jesus have the power to change the world!

But let's look at another key line in this passage. Right at the very end, we are told that the disciples “did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”

Despite witnessing unbelievable miracles, the disciples doubted. Their hearts were hardened, as Pharaoh's was, against the presence of God in their midst. They didn't understand Jesus' miracles. They didn't understand God's grace.

We do this too.

Whenever we let a mindset of scarcity triumph over a mindset of abundance, we have let our hearts be hardened against the presence of God among us.

Whenever we believe that a blessing for someone else means fewer blessings for us, we demonstrate our unfaithfulness.

God's grace is limitless! Jesus used each loaf of bread to feed 2000 people! It was impossible! But everyone ate and was filled. They didn't just take a crumb, they ate as much as they wanted, until they felt full. The miracle of God's love didn't run out.

God's grace is sufficient, not just for my needs, but for the needs of the whole world. So when I see someone hungry, I can feed them, without worrying about whether I'll have enough food at my next meal. God promises that the more we share with others, the more abundant our own lives will be.

The feeding of the 10,000 has several important meanings for our lives of faith. When we have some kind of need, we can be comforted by the knowledge that God has already recognized whatever it is that we're looking for.

But it isn't God's acknowledgement that directly fulfills our needs. The actions of faithful people can fulfill the needs of others. So, when you are in need, look for help from other people. Or, if you happen to have enough at the moment, look for ways you can help meet the needs of others.

God will work through your hands and feet and hearts.

Your actions are what can change the world.

Through your generosity, the whole world can be fed!

And the whole world can be taught, as the crowds were in today's story... and saved from oppression as in the book of Exodus, and protected from harm, and clothed, and freed, and brought to wholeness, as countless examples in Scripture show us.

Jesus had compassion.

But Jesus sends *us* out to be the miracle-workers.

And in the midst of all that, let's try not to let our hearts be hardened.

When we see God's abundant grace at work, it's worth giving thanks!

Even if we are not the ones bringing or receiving the blessing this time around, we know that we've been blessed before, and we will be again. A miracle in someone else's life doesn't lessen the chance for a miracle in our own. There's nothing to be selfish about.

God's love and grace abound more and more, the more that we celebrate that love and grace wherever it shows up, in anyone's life!

Thanks be to God! Amen.