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God of Abundance
Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a **deserted place** by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have **nothing** here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were **filled**; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, **twelve baskets full**. ²¹ And those who ate were about **five thousand men, besides women and children**.

This story comes after a **tragedy involving John the Baptist**, Jesus' cousin, the one who had prepared the way for Him as Messiah. Listen to what happened before this story:

Herod had arrested John the Baptist, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,^[b] ⁴ because John had been telling him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." ⁵ Though Herod^[c] wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet. ⁶ But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod ⁷ so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." ⁹

And Herod did it.

Then John's disciples came for his body and went to tell Jesus.

That is the **CONTEXT** of this story.

In response, Jesus withdraws to a **DESERTED place** by himself.

He was surely grieving the loss of his dear friend,

He may have been pondering his own death,

knowing what was to come.

The word for **deserted place** is important.

The Greek word is **eremos**.

It means a solitary, desert or wilderness place.

Which **echoes many stories** in the Bible—in the Old and New Testaments.

In Hebrew thought,

the **desert or wilderness is a place of wandering, testing, and temptation**.

It's a **liminal space**---a space of transition.

But also potentially a space of learning and transformation.

The Israelites escape Egypt, cross the Red Sea,

and spend 40 years wandering in the **wilderness** with Moses,

before entering the Promised Land.

Jesus is tempted by Satan for 40 days in the **wilderness**.

And the wilderness or deserted place

is also a place **where God does amazing things!**

The Israelites received bread from heaven,

Called manna, which feeds them, as we read in Exodus 16.

Jesus is waited on by angels who feed him after his fasting and temptation.

And there's **another reason why the deserted place is important--**

What if it's where **we find ourselves TODAY?**

Aren't we in a kind of deserted place,

wandering through the wilderness—

in this time of inflation, uncertainty, crazy politics, all kinds of changes?

Isn't this a place that can be filled with uncertainty, fear, and anxiety?

And we, like the Israelites,

And like the crowd of 5000, are wondering what God will do for us.

We too are **hungry for God's help**, aren't we?

So **this story** can really speak to us today, if we pay attention!
 We need the **transformation** that can come from this wilderness space.

So, part of what Matthew sets up are some **stark CONTRASTS**
 that speak to us today.

And because this passage happens in the shadow of Herod's brutal party,
 And John the Baptist's death,
 that's the first contrast.

On one hand we have **Herod**,
 the son of Herod the Great, who ruled when Jesus was born,
 and had all the baby boys murdered out of fear of a newborn Messiah.
 This younger Herod, like his father, is all about power, might, and brutality.

On the other hand, **we have Jesus**.
 He is not about power, he is about **people**.
 We see him moved by compassion for the crowds that follow him.
 Even in his grief and anguish he does not turn away from their needs.

While Herod acts out of **brutality**, Jesus acts out of **hospitality**.
 He is moved to help the people—in body and soul.
 He starts by curing the sick, and then moves to feed the hungry crowd.

Isn't this **contrast between POWER AND PEOPLE** important in our world today?
 Don't we see leaders all the time, grasping for power?
 Haven't we seen the effect of harsh words, violence, and brutality in these
 unsettled times?

And then we hear a story like this, about Jesus.
Calling us to seek the good of PEOPLE, not power.

So if we **find ourselves in a deserted place**,
 we are called to follow a different way of life--
The way of Jesus.
The way of people.

And there is an even more **important contrast** in this story!

A contrast that we deal with in the church still today.
The contrast is between the **DISCIPLES AND JESUS**.

On one hand, the disciples see the hungry crowds,
and **want them SENT AWAY** to buy their own food at the end of a long day.
On the other hand, Jesus sees them and feels this deep **compassion for** them.

The disciples want **Jesus to send** the crowd away.
Jesus wants the **disciples to feed** the crowd!

The disciples see **hungry people**,
Jesus sees **people hungry for food, and so much more**.

The disciples see **SCARCITY**.
They say to Jesus: *"We have **nothing** here but five loaves and two fish."*
Did you catch that?
They say to Jesus: We have **NOTHING**.
This five loaves and 2 fish can't feed this huge crowd.
It's as good as nothing!

Have **YOU ever felt** that way?
That you have nothing to offer?
Or nothing to give?
That you cannot meet the needs of the people around you?
What do we do when we feel that way?

And what about **feeling that way before God**—
That we have nothing to offer, nothing to give to God?
Or what we do have seems so insignificant!

The Disciples see **SCARCITY**.
Jesus sees **ABUNDANCE**.

Bring the food here to me, he says.
Then he **takes, blesses, breaks, and gives** it back to the disciples,
And they are miraculously able to feed that crowd!

Where the disciples see **ONLY 7 pieces** of food,
 Jesus sees **7 pieces of food**—
 7, the number of completeness, fullness, wholeness,
 just like the creation story!

And in fact, like the **parable of the mustard seed** in Matthew 13,
 where the smallest seed becomes the largest tree,
 these 7 little pieces of food lead to everyone eating,
 and **12 baskets** of leftovers!

12.

Just like the 12 tribes of Israel.

Just like the 12 disciples.

Do you think these numbers are coincidence? Definitely not!

This is a **life-changing miracle story!**

In fact, this **miracle story** is the only one told in all 4 Gospels—

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John!

They each tell the story of the feeding the 5000!

And it's a miracle that is far bigger than feeding over 5000 people!

It is the miracle of **Jesus' love**.

Of God's **provision**.

Of **Jesus' compassion and hospitality**.

This story is not about Jesus' preaching....this time it's his actions.

In **hospitality**...

and he's doing it through his disciples.

He is feeding the people—in **more ways than one**.

They receive **food**—

they also receive the **miracle** of seeing that small basket feed everyone else.

This is a **pattern in the Bible**.

There are dozens of miracle stories about food and feeding people.

There is this feeding of the 5000,

Which is followed by a feeding of the 4000 in Mark and Matthew.

Remember the story last week of Elijah feeding the widow with the little jug of flour and jar of oil in **1 Kings 17?**

And Elisha miraculously feeds 100 in **2 Kings 4.**

In **Psalm 107** and many other psalms we read how God fills the hungry with good things.

In fact, **the kingdom of God** is often referred to as a **great banquet or feast.** Jesus tells parables about who will be invited, and who will attend.

Jesus also talks about the time of judgment and how we will be judged by **whether we fed the hungry, the least of these.**

Again and again we see how God **feeds** people,
How God's provision is **abundant,**
How God in Jesus Christ is a **good and generous** God.

So what does that mean for us—right now, at stewardship time?

Could it mean that we are also called to be generous?

Just like God is generous to us?

Could it mean that we are **called to share our gifts?**

Even if we feel like it's not enough?

After all, this is also a miracle story about **discipleship.**

For it is **not Jesus** who feeds this crowd of over 5000 people--

It is the **disciples who personally feed** them!

They are the ones passing out basket after basket of broken pieces of bread and fish, and then collecting all the leftovers!

Think about that for us--

What does it mean to you that Jesus has **the disciples feed the people?**

Aren't **WE the disciples?**

Aren't we called to believe in

the truth of God's **abundance, vs. the myth scarcity?**

That's not easy.

When we see a ***lunchbox***, we don't assume it can feed a ***crowd***.

When we see our ***bank statement***, we don't assume it can change countless lives through God's work.

But it can!

And the Bible reminds us that ***we are the body of Christ***,
His hands and feet on earth today.

So ***how will we bring what we have to God***,
and trust that it is more than enough?

When we give in to that ***myth of scarcity***,
And feel like it's not enough to go around, or to last,
That's exactly when we are asked to trust in the ***truth—
of God's abundance!***

Isn't this what stewardship is all about?

Stewardship is the idea that everything we have is a gift from God,
And we are just the ***stewards, the caretakers*** of all of it.

And stewardship is also about believing in God's truth, and
Who God is.

Our God is ***a God of abundance***,

It's our own fears that give in to the myth of scarcity.

And ***scarcity is a myth***.

It's what the disciples saw in that little basket of food.

Scarcity.

Not enough.

Jesus asks that we believe in a ***different kind of 'divine math'***—
where we give, and give, and there is more than enough.
Where giving generously leads to blessings.

Which isn't easy.

Because, we are tempted to ***hoard and save***,

but by giving we learn that our jar of flour and jug of oil does not run out,

and our basket of loaves and fish can feed a crowd!
And our bank account has life-changing power to make a difference in this world,
beyond what we can see or imagine—all by the power of God.

What if that is the **Good News** today?
That when we are willing to **give** what we have,
Even if we feel like it's not enough,
Even if we think we can't share,
Even if we believe we can't make a difference---

When we are willing to **trust** in God's love, provision, and miracles,
We have more than enough—we have leftovers!

Friends, that is the **Good News of the Gospel**.
Even in a wilderness time,
Even in a time of difficulty, fear, or transition,
Jesus uses what we give, and turns it into abundance!
He is the God of Abundance,
Who always provides,
more than we could ever ask or imagine!

May we **open our hearts and lives to this amazing God**.
May we bring our gifts,
and witness the power of Jesus in our midst!
And for this, all God's people say together, Amen