

Can you remember the last wedding you attended?

Groom and bride repeated the familiar vows:

I take you to have and to hold
from this day forward
for better, for worse,
in plenty and in want;
in joy and in sorrow;
in sickness and in health;
as long as we both shall live.

And in those simple promises,
a new household emerges
out of a union blessed by God.

God sustains this new household
guiding everything that happens.
It is a new household of God.

The Greek word for “household” is *oikos*.

From this root comes the English word “economy.”

In a linguistic sense, a household is an economy.

A household economy is one part
of the cosmic economy of God.

Each household is a room in the household of God.

You can tell if it’s a household of God
if it runs on principles of justice.

In Want and In Plenty.

Our gospel lesson describes a household, of sorts.

It’s a spontaneous economic community
that arrives In Want and leaves In Plenty.

The miracle is recounted in all four gospels,
twice in two gospels.

As our lesson opens, Jesus and the disciples
are retreating by boat from the ever-pressing crowds.

John the Baptist, that great wilderness preacher,
has just met an untimely and gruesome death
at the hands of Herod.

The wilderness is a good place for honoring John,
a place to grieve, pray, repent, and fast.

Jesus is seeking privacy and much-needed rest.

Though Jesus is not alone.

God is near, as the psalmist says.

Lord, you are my shepherd, I shall not want.

You make me to lie down in green pastures.

You lead me beside the still waters.

You restore my soul.

But when he arrives at the designated resting place,
townspeople from all along the coast
have assembled, an unexpected throng.

You and I would probably be annoyed.

Jesus reacts with customary grace.

The moment Jesus sees the gathered people,
he feels compassion way down to his gut.

People clamor for his attention,
seeking comfort and healing.

Physical health and spiritual health
are of a piece for Jesus.

He restores one sick person after another.

It is hard work.

By dusk, this household needs more
than spiritual nourishment, they need real food.

Jesus senses an opportunity for people
to lie down in green pasture, together.

The disciples don’t.

They suggest that people go back to town
to forage on their own.

This would effectively suspend the proceedings –
and allow Jesus to get on with his retreat.

Jesus will have none of their resistance.

“No need for the people to go away.

“You – you, and you – give them something to eat.”

The disciples push back,
on the perfectly rational grounds of scarcity.

Between them,

the twelve have only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish.

Not a lot, Jesus reflects, but not nothing, either.

Whatever resources this household has
are sufficient for God’s purposes.

He orders the people to prepare for a meal.

by settling on the grass.

He offers a blessing,
probably the ancient Jewish *berakah*:
"Blessed are you, Lord of the Universe,
who brings forth food from the earth."
His blessing gives this gathering
a special significance.
Blessing and breaking the bread
is an ancient Jewish custom.
Jesus will perform the same blessing and breaking
later in his last supper with the disciples.
Through this simple blessing, Jesus expands
the household's sense of God's grace.
He breaks the bread and dried fish into pieces,
and hands the pieces to the disciples,
who distribute them to the crowd.
The many thousands are fed to satisfaction,
with twelve bushels left over,
one for each disciple, one for every tribe of Israel.
It is a feeding miracle.

Miracles are subject to interpretation –
and always have been, even to eye-witnesses.
No doubt some enjoying that meal on the hillside
see in the feeding God's abundant power.
No doubt some suspect Jesus of black magic,
or collaborating with evil forces.
The feeding miracle has had myriad interpretations.
Thinking back to my adolescence,
I recall a Sunday school teacher
trying to rationalize the feeding miracle.
"People didn't go to deserted places
without food; they planned ahead.
"So at the invitation to eat,
people shared what food they brought."
Even as a youth, I was not sure I believed
either the literal miracle or the rationalistic one.
I sensed the mass feedings were central to faith.
I struggled hard to accept them.
Pastor Bruce Robbins shares my struggle.

As an exchange student in Columbia,
he once visited a church at the top of a mountain,
its interior walls lined with crutches,
up to the ceiling.
The crutches looked well-used
before being discarded up there.
Evidently, people climbed the mountain
with the aid of these crutches,
and descended without them.
Here Robbins saw evidence
of powerful, on-going healing.
The same spiritual power at work in that chapel
is at work in the miraculous feeding.
It is the power of God's will made visible.
God's will is to restore all people
to a relationship with God.
Let's admit that we have some resistance
to this miracle, despite its familiarity.
We are like the disciples in many ways –
saying we care for those who don't have enough,
but not inclined to really do something about it.
Thy will be done, as long as I get my share.
Thy will be done, as long as it isn't inconvenient.
Thy will be done, unless
I have to do something extra.
Are we any different from those disciples who say,
"Send them away..."
when we refer needy people of our community
to the Pyle Center or to Love, Inc.?
Notwithstanding our excellent benevolence record,
this church spends more resources
on its own needs as a church
than on the needs of the world around us.
Most churches do.
Is this God's will?
If we have any personal wealth at all,
we tend to keep it separate from our spiritual life.
After all, who needs their conscience
directing their investment portfolio?

But Jesus knows there is a direct connection between spiritual and physical well-being, in a godly household.
 How much do we have to give?
 is the wrong question, according to this text.
 The true question is about need:
 How much is needed? By whom?
 How soon? Where?
 The miracles Jesus performs throughout his ministry address serious matters – like hunger, illness, deformity, and broken relationships.
 The World at Large accepts broken conditions as the status quo.
 But the Feeding Miracle directly contradicts the status quo.
 Those who experience the life of abundance Jesus offers must accept a mandate to share with a world in need.
 Too often, the laws of the world economy (as distinct from God’s economy) are treated as if they were immutable and ordained:
 There will be want for some.
 There will be plenty for others.
 It’s an ethic of scarcity.
 Theologian Joerg Rieger states the challenge:
 “Breaking the laws of physics by working a miracle is one thing.
 “But what about the laws that say some get to eat and some do not?
 Are they created by God, too?”
 Hunger in most of the world is less a matter of true scarcity, and more a matter of the lopsided distribution of food.
 We may make attempts to redress the imbalance.
 The Food Closet at Pyle Center, for example, is a blessing both to givers and receivers.

But even those who devote hours to helping would admit that doling out food to each household four weeks at a time is only a Band-Aid.
 A food pantry is hardly equivalent to the Great Banquet in the kingdom of God.
 In the matter of hunger, lack of resources isn’t the problem.
 The problem is lack of compassion.
 Material resources – time, money, people, supplies – eventually run out.
 Spiritual resources such as generosity, compassion, and healing never run out.
 To change the World at Large from an ethic of scarcity to an ethic of abundance will take a miracle, indeed.
 The household of the World is hungry.
 The household of God has limitless resources.
 It’s a marriage made in heaven.
 On that lakeside, Jesus directs the crowd to assemble as one body.
 The assembly is an icon of the early church – a family of families sitting peaceably together to be filled.
 There is a spiritual reality at work that is bigger than anything humans can provide for themselves.
 The lesson of the Feeding Miracle is that no human need is too great – or too small – for God’s will to be done.
 For those here this morning who adopt a rational explanation of the Feeding Miracle, there is still much to be learned and appreciated.
 Take away the Elijah-like aspect of the multiplying of loaves.
 Take away the manna-like feeding of the multitudes of people.

What you're reduced to is an enthusiastic crowd –
whole families, including women and children –
present with Jesus in the wild lake country.

In a crowd upwards of 15,000,
Jesus holds the center.

Jesus gives them new hearing, new understanding,
and new hope that God's will
includes each and every one of them.

The picnic on the lakeshore still gives us a taste
of the magnificent banquet to be consummated
in the Kingdom of God.

I believe that this feeding miracle happened.

It was probably pretty scary and wonderful.

The wonder is that the account was preserved –
not only once, but six times in the four gospels.

It would have been far easier
for the gospel writers to catalog Jesus' teachings.

Instead, the gospels put on display his acts
as well as teachings,
including those acts that cannot be easily explained.

Jesus' wonderful acts were told over and over,
giving them authority and power to last the ages.

One of the reasons this miracle
has resonated in the church through the ages
is the echo of the Lord's Supper,
another simple meal that completely satisfies.

Today when we observe the Lord's Supper,
you chew the little cube of bread
and sip the little bit of grape juice,
and remember the Feeding Miracle.

Believe the truth that God provides
an economy for the world and for you,
based on compassion and justice.

Trust that bread, that juice is sufficient
to provide us with what our own devising cannot –
healing, peace, and community.

May the household of God be ever so,
In Want and In Plenty.

Amen.