

## From Solitude to Multitude

Wayne Waibel – 08/02/2020

The story of feeding the five thousand is very well known, even among folks that have little to no religious affiliation. It is the only miracle that is in all four of the gospels. There are as many lessons to be culled from it as there are readers of it. It's so familiar to most of us that it easily passes into the realm of routine scripture.

There is nothing routine about this miracle, and yet – at its core – it is simply the outpouring of the love God has for humanity – it's not that complicated. There are of course nuances at work throughout this passage in Matthew. And that is precisely why it speaks to us a little differently each time we read it.

The same could be said for our Old Testament lesson for today describing Jacob's wrestling match. It too – is a very familiar tale, and does in fact garner a multitude of responses within us each time we read the passage.

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When Jacob initially left his homeland, as you may recall – he was running for his life from the wrath of his older brother Esau. In his solitude on this escape he had his fateful dream. Now – twenty years later, after sending his family and flocks ahead to act as a buffer between him and what he thought would be a brother still bent on vengeance, he found himself alone again.

But he had grown as a man by this time. The deceit, trickery and manipulation of his past were about to fall away. In solitude we are exposed and vulnerable – enter God.

Whether a test of character or a test of faith, God is about to challenge Jacob and in so doing, reshape his character to live into his promised destiny as Israel. I know a lot of folks have a confusion about this story because it defies all of our sensibilities to think that a man could wrestle with God and prevail. God will not only get down and dirty with us – sometimes He'll let us. That's how much He loves us. And sometimes we survive by nothing more elegant than not giving up.



I remember the first time my mother found a pack of cigarettes in one of my coat pockets. When she told my father, his response was, "He don't smoke." And in the intervening years, whenever it was brought to his attention by anyone – his response was always the same, "He don't smoke."

Fast forward to the recent past, I asked him years after I'd quit smoking how, even when presented with ironclad evidence, he would still insist that I did not smoke? He simply said, "I always figured one day – you'd quit – that's the truth I was speaking to." It took me thirty years to justify his faith. Talk about not giving up!

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In many Bibles, the little subject heading at the top of our reading today in Matthew says, "Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand," or words to that effect. Here's the kicker – Jesus fed the twelve - THEY fed the five thousand. A tiny little detail that holds massive implications.

Jesus was looking for some solitude – some alone time, but once again – the world intervened and suddenly he was healing the sick and ministering to the throngs. No sermon – no parables – this is a story of activity. Jesus is just meeting human need, but it begins with Him trying to find time alone.

This is where the distinction becomes mission critical. Our call is to active ministry that meets human need. Jesus does not feed the five thousand – He tells the disciples to do it. His desire for solitude is made manifest in empowering the twelve to feed the multitude.

This miracle is also a foreshadowing of the Lord's Supper. Certainly, a social gospel call to action, but also tied to Holy mystery. "And when Jesus went out, He saw a great multitude, and He was moved with compassion for them." Christ's entire mission as it pertains to the coming of God's kingdom is shaped by compassion. He quotes Hosea 6:6 more than once in His ministry, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." God is love.

These kinds of stories throughout the gospel resonate with us now because they were written as a deep source of hope and inspiration for early Christians who were seeking to be faithful against great odds. They clarify and inform our singular truth – human existence rests on the word of God. We are utterly dependent on God. I know it's a little contrary to the American spirit of self-reliance, but personally – I've got absolutely no problem with that truth. We ARE utterly dependent on God.

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There's no shortcut – no easy way around it. This world can be daunting. Its challenges can pound us into dust. Heartbreak may very well be how God enters our hearts as fully as we have entered God's and we share some of the pain of His love rejected. But again – as Paul outlined in last week's lection – nothing can separate us from the love of God – not even our own foolish rejection of it.

At the end of the day, or in Jacob's case – the end of the night, after struggling mightily and refusing to let go until he had his blessing – he walked away with abundant blessing. But don't forget – he also walked away with a limp. When you're going toe to toe with God – you better be all in. Makes it easier to bear the scars.

As Jesus demonstrated to the disciples who wanted to send the multitude away because there was not enough – when it comes to God – there is always enough – enough and more. And as He commanded the twelve to give them something to eat, God has entrusted us to be the body of Christ – to be His boots on the ground to a world in desperate need.

COVID-19 is new, but sickness is not. The latest episodes of civil unrest are new, but social injustice is not. The current political climate is new, but the corrupting nature of power is not. We have been actively engaged in this thing called life all of our lives, because we understand as Christians our deep commitment to participate.

We know that when we reach out to the least of these, our brethren, we encounter Jesus. And so, we lace up our boots in a time of unrest and uncertainty, and find our solitude among the multitudes. Sometimes we walk away limping, but that comes from strength – not weakness. Because above all else, we are called to be partners with God in making the fullness of life – a reality. Amen.