

“The Bread of Life: Coast to Coast”  
Matthew 14:13-21

It's a frightening time in our American history! Our economy as we know it is changing so dramatically that it is hard to predict what is going to happen. Our national debt has reached such a new height that the 13-digit clock in New York's Times Square that counts up the national debt has officially run out of space! Surpassing the \$9.99 trillion mark, the clock was taken down this week. And with no end to the hemorrhaging in sight, a new clock must be constructed. This is of course not counting all the debt. What we really owe as a nation is about 55 trillion dollars if you count the cost of war and all the tax credits that were given without any backing. 47 million people in our country are without health coverage which is about 16% of our population. The unemployment rate is the highest in 5 years. Even in Batavia, the Salvation Army is reporting that the number of people asking for food assistance has doubled since last September. Catholic Charities is reporting a 75% increase in people requesting assistance.

What is interesting about all of this is that our context today is not that different from the context of the people in our Bible story. This was a time of fear and uncertainty for Jesus, his disciples, and all his followers. Just before this episode in Matthew's Gospel, the writer had recounted the black communion of Herod Antipas where John the Baptist's head was presented on a platter. Matthew has John's disciples come and tell Jesus of the execution. John the Baptist, was Jesus' cousin, his colleague in ministry, a prophet and a teacher. Matthew's Gospel account had told us of the beheading of John the Baptist – killed because he denounced Herod Antipas' marriage to his brother Philip's wife when Philip was still alive (a violation of Jewish law). So Jesus goes by boat to a lonely spot as a direct response to John's execution. Maybe Jesus saw the writing on the wall for him. He could be next. The feeding of the 5000, in that sense, came at a time of great distress.

Another interesting piece here is that Jesus goes out into a deserted spot, but 5000 men, not counting the women and children, followed Jesus. So this spot wasn't that deserted after all! Maybe the people gathered when they heard that John was executed and they needed a word of comfort and encouragement. The disciple's first instinct was to send the people away. This was in their minds no time for a feast or a public gathering. This was a time to keep a low profile and to grieve. But Jesus had compassion on the crowd and instructed the disciples to give them something to eat. In a time of fear, we are tempted to look only after ourselves. But in faith we are called to open up to others and to work together. The disciples' response to Jesus asking them to give the people something to eat is a typical one. They thought that Jesus was asking them to go out and buy food for everyone. They had forgotten about how God provided the people of Israel with manna in the desert. They had forgotten about the story of the Prophet Elisha's multiplication of the barley loaves that were given to him by a servant (2 Kings 4:42-44). They had forgotten about the power of a community sharing what they have in order to survive. But when the disciples gave their five loaves and the two fish, people began to share.

This is an amazing miracle of a group of people being transformed from being fearful and grieving to a people who are able to step outside of themselves to serve the greater good of the whole community. Their worldview was headed in the direction of a survival mode, but this miracle was about them being rerouted in the path of faith, generosity and openness.

This is certainly a story of a miracle but it is not what we have traditionally limited it to. For centuries, this story has been viewed as a magic/supernatural act of multiplying the bread, despite the fact that there is nothing “supernatural” reported in the Gospel itself. What we are told is that “they all ate and were filled.” Most likely the people shared the food they had with them. A peasant in Palestine, then and now, travelled with food. In his book, *Binding the Strong Man*, Ched Myers writes, “The only ‘miracle’ here is the triumph of the economics of sharing within a community of consumption over against the economics of autonomous consumption in the anonymous marketplace.”

With the traditional understanding of Jesus' transforming of the loaves, we would put the focus on the loaves themselves experiencing transformation and becoming an endless supply of bread. But with looking at the story in its context and paying attention to its details and symbols, we can see that what was really transformed were the selfish hearts of five thousand men to be inspired to share the food that they brought with them. The real transformation then, was not of the loaves, but of five thousand selfish hearts. Which would be the greater miracle? I think it is easier for us to focus on the transformation of the loaves in order to avoid focusing on the power of transformation of our selfish hearts so that liberation comes to our lives and the lives of all in our communities.

This story of the feeding of the 5000 men reminds me of the popular story, "Stone Soup." A woman in a village was surprised to find a fairly well-dressed stranger at her door asking for something to eat. "I'm sorry," she said, "I have nothing in the house right now." "Not to worry," said the friendly stranger. "I have a soup stone in my bag; if you will let me put it in a pot of boiling water, I'll make the most delicious soup in the world. A very large pot, please." The woman was curious. She put the pot on the fire and whispered the secret of the soup stone to a neighbor. By the time the water began to boil, all the neighbors had gathered to see the stranger and his soup stone. The stranger dropped the stone into the water and then tasted a teaspoonful with relish and exclaimed, "Ah, delicious! All it needs is some potatoes." "I have potatoes in my kitchen," shouted one woman. In a few minutes she was back with a large quantity of sliced potatoes, which were thrown into the pot. Then the stranger tasted the brew again. "Excellent!" he said. But added wistfully, "If we only had some meat, this would become a tasty stew." Another woman rushed home to bring some meat, which the stranger accepted graciously and flung into the pot. When he tasted the broth again, he rolled his eyes heavenward and said, "Ah, tasty! If we had some vegetables, it would be perfect, absolutely perfect." One of the neighbors rushed off home and returned with a basketful of carrots and onions. After these had been thrown in too and the stranger tasted the mixture, he said in a voice of command, "Salt and sauce." "Right here," said the housewife. Then came another command: "Bowls for everyone." People rushed to their homes in search of bowls. Some even brought back bread and fruit. Then they all sat down to a delicious meal while the stranger handed out large helpings of his incredible soup. Everyone felt strangely happy as they laughed and talked and shared their very first common meal. In the middle of the merriment the stranger quietly slipped away leaving behind the miraculous stone, which they could use anytime they wanted to make the loveliest soup in the world.

Liberation and economic freedom are within our reach. It is not that we need more resources in our world. What we need is more sharing. Rev. Shehadeh Shehadeh, an Arab Israeli priest recently said, "There is enough in the world for everyone's need, but there is not enough for everyone's greed." Our world produces enough food for 7 billion people and we only have 6 billion people in the world. The same is true in our country. We have enough in our country for everyone to have the basics of life covered. What we don't have is the will to share. What we need are more examples of people who are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to share in times of distress. In your bulletin, there is an insert about the image of the bread of life being shared from coast to coast through the mission and ministry of this congregation. Three years ago when Hurricane Katrina hit the south, it was amazing to see the outpouring of love and resources from people across the country. It is estimated that 80% of the recovery efforts have been conducted by volunteer groups. Kay Fetterly is going to share with us her experience the sharing that has happened with people affected by this disaster.

Kay Fetterly: Roula asked me if today, as we focus on our national mission projects, I would speak about my experiences in New Orleans. Through the generosity of this congregation I have been fortunate enough to travel twice to New Orleans to assist in the ongoing efforts of helping the city recover from the effects of Hurricane Katrina. On October 14, 2006 Bev Hoy, Nina Stevens, Robin Woodams and I traveled with a Presbytery sponsored team

to St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church , home of Project RHINO, the acronym for Rebuilding Hope in New Orleans. Although it had been over a year since Katrina struck, the devastation was evident. I had never visited there before, but it was easy to see that this city was a skeleton of its former self. Over the seven days we were there we saw first-hand what a home looks like 14 months after it was inundated by 6-10 feet of salt water; we heard the stories of what people did to survive; and we experienced the heartfelt thanks of people who welcomed our help. The experience was life-changing -- we went to share and came back transformed.

Among our group in October were Millie Tomidy and Bryce Kaiser from the LeRoy Presbyterian Church. In 2007 I received a call from them to say they were organizing a group from LeRoy to go to New Orleans and would I like to join them. I hardly hesitated before agreeing. This time we worked through Catholic Charities, which has a huge rebuilding effort underway. The work we did was the same and the people working were equally enthused. However, there was a major difference this trip -- her name is Marilyn. I spoke to this congregation about Marilyn when I returned, but I would like to refresh your memories. Marilyn is a retired middle-school teacher for whom Katrina was the second hurricane to have left her homeless. This time, though, she did not have her husband by her side to help her through the physical and emotional turmoil. The Catholic Charities team leader to whom our group had been assigned felt that Marilyn needed more than just our physical help. David Pepper, pastor at LeRoy Presbyterian, went out first to meet her and returned to tell us about a lovely lady who had lost hope. Part of our job the next day would be to take turns sitting with Marilyn , listening to her story, praying with her, and offering reassurance and comfort. We actually spent two days with Marilyn deconstructing her home, helping her sort through belongings, planting flowers, listening and praying. We invited Marilyn to join us for dinner in the French Quarter the evening before we would leave. The food was excellent, the music was good, and Marilyn glowed.

Last spring several members of that LeRoy group traveled again to New Orleans with another Presbytery group. They were able to spend a day with Marilyn helping her finally move from the FEMA trailer in her driveway to her renovated home. Because I knew they were going to see her, I sent a VISA gift card to her. She went out promptly to purchase a microwave for her new kitchen and within a few days I received a gracious thank you note. Marilyn is not just another anonymous face helped by the generosity of unknown strangers. That is not to say that helping someone whom I will never meet is any less valuable, but when I close my eyes, I can see her sitting on her patio, her eyes glistening with tears, talking to one after another of her "angels." But the story doesn't end there. This Thursday Marilyn will arrive in upstate NY for a 4-days visit in LeRoy, and next Sunday evening I will see her again. Through God's grace this national mission is going local.

Our country is going through a difficult crisis and it seems that we need a miracle to turn things around. But the miracle we need is for people to learn about the power of sharing. Are we ready for such a miracle? Amen.