The story of the feeding of the multitude is probably one of the more familiar ones. It is told in some variation in all four gospels.

Often when we read this text, the focus is on the miracle of the multiplying bread and we quickly conclude that this story is a foreshadowing of the Last Supper and symbolizes sacrament of communion. That connection is easy to make as Jesus’ actions in both scenarios are similar: he takes bread, gives thanks and offers it to those present. In the story it is easy to infer that Jesus is the true bread of heaven who offers the bread of life to those who follow him. All who partake of this meal are wrapped up in God’s abundant love never to hunger again. This is an often-embraced read of the story. It is clean and quick and tidy. Christ is the bread of life, and we are the crowd enjoying a miraculous picnic in the grass. The subtext is that there is plenty and prosperity with this prophet from Galilee. He works miracles - healing the sick, raising people from the dead, walking on water, and feedings those who hunger with physical as well as spiritual food. Through the meal, God shares love and grace and does so abundantly.

Another way of interpreting the text invites us to read as if we are among those closest to Jesus – his disciples. In this reading, we are the obedient ones. The disciples identify the raw materials for the miracle. They organize the crowd and distribute the bounty. When all have been fed, the disciples gather up the remnants, and then when the time comes for solitude, they hustle Jesus off to a quiet place for refuge away from the enthusiastic crowd. The disciples, in this scenario, become the bridge between the people and Jesus. They play very important supporting actor roles. They are distributors as well as recipients of the great gift of sustenance. They demonstrate loyalty and obedience to Jesus participating in the miracle by taking on the “grunt work” of moving the meal from Jesus’ hands to the mouths of those who are hungry. Perhaps you can see yourself as a disciple where, “We are called out of a receiving world to serve the world. We are called to be those who carry the trays and help to distribute the gifts of God’s grace to others.”

This, again, is a perfectly acceptable way of reading the story. In it we go from viewing ourselves as being among the crowd to being more integral to the action – from mere recipient to more active participant. We must be careful in this interpretation that we do not fancy ourselves as too integral to the miracle, though. After all, we are not Jesus who blesses the bread and multiplies it. We should always remember that God is perfectly capable of ‘carrying the trays’ without us. We do not participate for God but for our own joy of serving and our own opportunities to participate in God’s work of caring for creation.

In these two interpretations we first partake in this miracle when we gather at Christ’s table, and we then share our own bounteous baskets with one another. These represent the difference between the bread we live on and the bread we live out. We live on the bread of heaven that gives eternal life, and we live out the bread of the Kingdom when our responses to grace yield fruits of lovingkindness and service.

I am going to propose a third way of reading this text, however. What if we are the bread? I do not mean to imply that we are in any way equal to God; I don’t mean that we are the bread of heaven. But for a moment just imagine yourself as one of those five simple, rustic loaves. A barley loaf. (No offense to the fish in the story, but for the use of the analogy, I’d rather play the role of bread than a sardine.) What would it mean if we were the bread?

First of all, it would mean that God can work miracles with plain, ordinary, unimpressive raw materials. We know this, of course, but it never hurts to think of it anew. The disciples express the lackluster nature of bread saying, “(We have) five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that?” This bread is unimpressive, and bread, in general, is cheap. Bread is simple. Mark Bittman’s famous New York Times bread recipe uses only four ingredients: flour, yeast, salt and water. These barley loaves that Jesus receives are not what we would call “artisan”. They are not the fancy $6 boules that you can buy at the farmer’s market. Instead, this is the working man’s staple. It is plain and straightforward. Yet God can elevate this basic element into something phenomenal, into something miraculous, into something life-changing and life-giving.

---

1 Carl Hoefler, There Are Demons in the Sea, Lima: C.S.S. Publishing 1978, p172
2 Ibid, 170.
Like a tiny baby in a manger or rough-hewn sections of wood, God takes ordinary and unassuming materials and transforms them into means of grace. If God can generate a miracle from a lumpy loaf of bread, just think of what can be done with you and with me. The good news is that the transforming love of God is greater than our simplicity, our scarcity, and our fear. The transforming love of God overcomes our excuses and our mistakes and has the power to multiply our generosity and our righteousness.

Next, Jesus takes the bread and gives thanks for it. Now, Jesus was a good Jewish boy whose parents raised him with reverence and respect for his faith. He, no doubt, knew the traditional Jewish blessing before meals: "Blessed are you, oh God, Lord of the universe who brings forth bread from the earth." Jesus gives thanks for this bread and acknowledges that it has its origins in God. God is the ultimate creator and sustainer of the universe, and it is God from whom all things are made. Recall the creation story from Genesis 2 where God forms humankind from the dust of the ground. In this sense, we, too, are the bread from the earth. My Jewish friends might say that this is stretching the metaphor a bit, but the point is that, like the five barley loaves that Jesus lifts up, we are made by this almighty and creative God. We, too, were beautifully and wonderfully made — lumps and all.

The thanksgiving for the bread is a means of preparing it as a blessing for all who encounter it. How often do you think of yourself as a blessing to the world? This can be really difficult for some people. Believing oneself to be a wonderfully-made blessing means coming to recognize that those things we do not like about ourselves are part of the way God made us. Similarly, some of the things we might not like about others are part of the way God made them. We are all God's handiwork — lumps and all. To embrace the idea that we all were intentionally and wonderfully made by God to be a blessing suggests that the diversity with which God creates is a valuable thing.

In my work with students — especially those who struggle to maintain their mental health - this is the one message that I would like to imprint indelibly in their self-understandings: we all are blessed children of God: we all are beautifully and wonderfully made despite depression or anxiety, despite GPA or net worth. Is it possible to think that what we see as short comings in ourselves and others God intended as creative nuance? Yet, sometimes confusing difference for brokenness creates a vulnerability that makes this message so hard to accept. In a world where everyone else seems to be better off — better off financially, better off emotionally, better off relationally, better off physically — it is difficult to believe that we could offer anything worthwhile. To quote the disciples at the picnic again, "(We have) five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that?" — what good is that? What good are we? What good am I?

Instead of doubting the wonderfulness of our origins, we would do better to live into being the blessing that God intends us to be. Thanksgiving is a great place to start for that. Paul reminds us of this in the opening of his letter to the community at Philippi: "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you. … I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. We all start from humble, dusty beginnings, but with the activity of Christ in our lives, we are able to face the challenges of the world — and the challenges in ourselves — with a spirit of abundance.

There is at least one more facet to our reinterpreting this gospel story from the perspective of the bread. After Jesus procures the elements for the feast and gives thanks for them, they are broken and distributed to all as much as they wanted. (And) when the people were satisfied, Jesus told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."

Two things are striking about this passage from today's text. First, the people were satisfied. Five-thousand is A LOT of people. I can't imagine catering an event for that many mouths. Five-thousand is almost five times what this building can hold. Yet, as the disciples distributed this bread among the people, those five-thousand consumed as much as they wanted. For five-thousand people to have as much as each wanted from only five loaves meant that this bread had to keep multiplying and multiplying and multiplying. It was bread that kept on giving. In order to accomplish this, the bread was torn and passed around. The text refers to what was left as "fragments."

Do you ever feel fragmented? Do you ever find yourself spread so thinly that you fear that you might crumble? Do you ever wake up wondering how you will ever satisfy every demand placed on you and every person relying on you? Surely, this is how these five loaves felt. I don’t say that to sound trite. Instead, I say it to remind us of the grave reality that the work of the Kingdom is exhausting. The work of this world is also exhausting. And, if we are trying to satisfy the hunger of all those in need, of a multitude of demands, we will become torn apart and fragmented just like the bread in this miracle.
This summer I spent a week at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis. The seminary’s health and wellness task force had done a really good job papering every bathroom stall, office door, and bulletin board on campus with a flyer about healthy living. I had multiple opportunities to read and reflect on this flyer during my time on campus. There was a poem on this flyer that I could not get enough of. It was about the possibilities for grace-filled living in the slower days of summer. One line, in particular, resonated with me. It said: “Let this season be for me a time of gathering together the pieces into which my busyness has broken me.”

Do you feel broken by busyness? Do you feel scattered into a million – or at least five-thousand - pieces?

Remember that this story of abundance and plenty comes when Jesus and the disciples, themselves, are running on empty. Last week’s gospel reading had Jesus and the disciples seeking out places for quiet contemplation and rest. They were being pursued by the crowds who wanted some of the healing and wholeness that Jesus was offering. Jesus and the disciples could not seem to find a place that was far enough away to let them have a moment’s peace. As the crowds continued to follow and flock around Jesus and the twelve, he had compassion on them and put aside his own fatigue to teach and heal. Jesus and the disciples, too, might have needed to gather together the pieces lest they become lost in the busyness.

*When the people were satisfied, Jesus told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.”* So that nothing may be lost. In the midst of this multitude, Jesus, the bread of life, reminds us that ultimately he is the good shepherd – the one who seeks out the lost and safeguards their well-being. If we are the bread in this story, Jesus is sending us out to satisfy the longings of his people but is also looking out for us, gathering us in and keeping us safe.

The people of God have been promised an in-gathering with the Lord from ancient times. The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, *Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. … I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.* As with today’s gospel, Jeremiah tells of the remnant gathering and multiplying: We have the sending and the returning. We have the promises of abundance.

Theologian Henri Nouwen puts it this way in his book *Bread for the Journey.* “We want to live as people chosen, blessed, and broken, and thus become food for the world.” While God calls us to become bread, we always do so with the uncomfortable awareness that bread is best shared when it is broken. In the midst of our own brokenness and scattered crumbliness, we, too, are promised a return to the blessings of the family of God. In the midst of Christ’s great abundance, nothing and no one will be lost. We will all be gathered together – twelve baskets full – into the Kingdom of God.

And this, friends, is the good news of today’s gospel reading: We, the fragments, will be gathered up and none will be lost. Thanks be to God!

---


4 Jeremiah 23: 1-3