

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 14:13-21

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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.

When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd.
And he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

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."

Jesus said to them, "They need not go away.
You give them something to eat."

They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."
And he said, "Bring them here to me."

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.

And all ate and were filled;
and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.
And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The verbal threads that link this story together are relatively few. The first one is in the first episode, "when Jesus heard this" and then "when the crowds heard it." This verbal thread links these two sentences by the contrast between Jesus' discouragement from hearing about John the Baptist's arrest and the crowd's enthusiasm in following him. The verbal thread creates a change of mood or spirit between Jesus and the crowd. And it is interesting that in this instance Jesus is the "downer" whose spirit is lifted by the crowd.

The other major verbal thread is when the disciples say, "Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages" and Jesus' response: "They need not go away." (This translation follows the NRSV but I would suggest that this be translated in a more down to earth manner: "They don't need to go away.") There is some implied tension in this verbal thread between the disciples' giving Jesus an urgent order that Jesus first contradicts and then turns on them. A third verbal thread is the five loaves and two fish. Once again, this verbal thread creates a contrast between the disciples' naming the five loaves and two fish with a tone of cynicism about the meager resources they have found and Jesus' blessing and giving thanks for the five loaves and two fish.

The structure of the episodes is relatively easy to identify and to remember. The story clearly moves from episode to episode and if you simply give names to the episodes or visualize them, you can see the progression and simply describe what you are seeing in your mind's eye as you tell the story. The thing to remember in these stories is that many elements of meaning are conveyed by tone and attitude. Simply focus on what is happening in the story, tell that with an appropriate tone and attitude, and the story will come through with power.

In telling the story “with feeling” you are acting against the myth that you can simply read the story in a neutral tone and convey its original meaning. In actual fact, a neutral or detached attitude does distort things. There are many places in the story where the storyteller or Jesus is not neutral at all. If you tell the story in a neutral and emotionally detached manner, it miscommunicates what is happening in the story. For example, Jesus had a retreat in mind at the beginning of the story – he clearly wants to get away. When he comes ashore and sees the great crowd waiting for him, his retreat is blown. So, seeing the great crowd is not “Whoopee!” but “Oh no!” His compassion is then in contrast to his first response. That first response is conveyed by the storyteller's tone and attitude in reporting Jesus' “inside view” of the crowd. This is a description from Jesus' point of view and you want to convey this internal feeling when he saw this great crowd in a desert place where he wanted to be by himself.

Likewise the disciples' concern about what to do with these people is a natural response. There's nothing wrong about it. They are trying to figure out what to do. Their command to Jesus probably has some of the tone of an impatient student dealing with a dumb teacher who isn't paying attention to the time and has gotten carried away with his teaching. It isn't that they are simply indifferent to what is going on. They are concerned about the people and it looks to them as if Jesus is just continuing to teach and not paying attention to what time it is while these people need to get something to eat. Jesus' response is a kind of rebuke but actually it's simply a contradiction: “They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat.” Then the disciples have to figure out what to do with only two fish and five loaves of bread. So, when Jesus calls the crowd and orders them to sit on the grass, the question is, what is he going to do?

The description of Jesus taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven and blessing and breaking the bread is a liturgical moment that was almost certainly accompanied with the gestures. It is important to do those gestures as a part of telling the story because it's the gestures as much as the tone that convey the connections of this story with later parts of the gospel, especially the last supper in Jerusalem.

The miracle of Jesus feeding this multitude is connected with God's feeding Israel in the wilderness. There are no verbal threads or specific words in the story that make this explicit. But for any listener who knew the Exodus feeding story (Exodus 15-16), the connection is the overall story of the people being miraculously fed in the wilderness. It has several common motifs: the people's hunger, complaining people, and the miraculous

food. The climax of the Jesus story is the amazement at the sheer number of those fed, 5000 men plus women and children (could be as many as 10,000 – 15,000 people if there was at least one woman and one child with each of the men that were there. It is a truly extraordinary number that were fed and this is the wonder that needs to be conveyed at the end of the story. The last episode is a crescendo of wonder that is more and more amazing with each thing described.

And all ate and were filled;

and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces,
twelve baskets full.

And those who ate were about five thousand men,
besides women and children.