

Of all the miracles of Jesus, there is only one that appears in all four gospels in the Bible. It is the story of the feeding of the 5,000. You might think it would be the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Who, in writing a story about Jesus, wouldn't think to include the day he brought a dead man back to life? Or the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turns water into wine. Just one of the many services I wish I could offer to brides and grooms. Or the healing of the blind man in Jerusalem, who had never seen a day in his life until Jesus came along. *And Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud, spread it on the man's eyes and told him to wash, and behold!* It's hard to say what the real miracle was that day: Jesus or his spit. But each of these miracle stories appear only in one gospel. A couple miracles, like the calming of the great storm at sea, gets told by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but not by John. Depending upon the storyteller, a few of the details differ, but the main point is the same: The disciples are out in a boat with Jesus when quite suddenly a windstorm sweeps down out of the mountains and stirs up the wind and waves. The disciples seize up with fear. The boat is rocking, taking on water, and no one knows what to do, and Jesus, Jesus is asleep in the front of the boat. Out like a light. The disciples all wake him. "Lord, what is wrong with you? Don't you care about what's happening to us?" And Jesus, calm, cool, and collected, rebukes the wind and waves. He tells them to stand down, and they do. No question that day what the miracle was.

But for some reason, when John picks up his pen to write his story about Jesus, he doesn't include this miracle. And there are other miracle stories that Luke and/or Matthew include but Mark doesn't. Scholars and theologians have long debated why the gospel writers choose to tell their story about Jesus the way they do—including this detail but not that one.

Maybe you know this already, but the four gospels in the New Testament were not all written at the same time or with the same audience in mind. Though Matthew comes first in the Bible, Mark was actually written first, around the year 60, some 30 years after the life and death of Jesus.

Matthew wrote second. Unlike Mark, who was not Jewish and so did not write for a Jewish audience, with every word he puts down, Matthew is trying to convince his Jewish brothers and sisters that Jesus, though not your most typical Jew, really is God's gift of salvation for the Jews. Matthew's stories about Jesus are often placed in Jerusalem, in and around the temple, whereas most of Mark's stories take place in the rural parts, where Jesus is seen to be making friends with the non-religious types.

Similar to Mark in this way, Luke, a doctor and humanitarian, is concerned with the sick, the poor, and the outcast of society. And so Luke tells more stories about Jesus the healer and Jesus the one who has compassion on widows and children. Luke's gospel is filled with details about the people Jesus meets and the places he goes because Luke wants to make sure we understand that Jesus did not come to show love generally but to give love specifically, specifically to those whom no one else would love.

And then there's John. Like Matthew, John's gospel was also written with a Jewish audience in mind. However, unlike Matthew, who depicts Jesus as a Jew who is very concerned to remain in community with other Jews—who wants to share ministry and life with his fellow Jews—John's Jesus is a lot more edgy, often showing himself to be at odds with the Jewish leadership and even showing a contempt for their institutions and traditions. This may be because John's gospel was written almost 30 to 35 years after Matthew, some 60 years after Jesus was gone from the earth. By the time John got around to writing down his version of the life of Jesus, other communities—ones that would eventually come to be called Christian—had started popping up and taking root. Suddenly it was possible to be Jewish, to believe in God and to practice religion without having to go to the temple or make animal sacrifices every 7th day. In John's gospel, we get a Jesus who is almost other-worldly. He walks around like he's on a mission direct from God, like he's got a bad itch and the only thing that will make it stop is to find himself a cross to carry.

Four gospels; each written and told by different people at different times to different audiences; each committed to telling the story of Jesus, a story that apparently would not be complete for any of them without the part where Jesus feeds 5,000 people at one time. I don't know why, out of all the stories about Jesus, this is the one that neither Matthew, Mark, Luke, nor John can go without. I wonder if it's because the story is so relatable.

Not so much the part about the 5,000 people suddenly showing up to dinner. I mean, that probably hasn't happened to many of us. Maybe a few extra, unexpected guests at Thanksgiving, or the high school football team all over in the backyard after school, but 5,000 neglected, starving mouths to feed. That's what Jesus and the disciples are up against. Hard to relate to.

But not so hard to relate to when you think about the number of other needs we might run up against every day, needs that we don't feel we can meet.

How many teachers look out on a classroom full of students every day—students who are hungry to learn—but they don't have enough books or pencils to go around?

How many children wait in their bedroom at night, terrified and unable to turn off the light because they do not have a mother or father to tuck them in, or their mother or father does not care to?

How many people do you know who work two, three, four jobs but still can't find enough hours in the day or enough money in the bank to make ends meet?

How many elderly persons find themselves sitting in a hospital bed pushing the call button over and over and over again because, while I've never met a bad nurse, there simply aren't enough good ones to go around?

In many ways, it could be said that the story of the feeding of the 5,000 is nothing short of a political and social commentary on our lives.

It also speaks to a certain reality that exists within our churches. I want to strike out for a minute from what we often hear preachers say about the miracles of Jesus, that they are written down in the Bible as proof that if you just trust Jesus enough, amazing and impossible things will happen. We've been told that before, though I have my doubts that Jesus really works that way.

Did you notice what Jesus says to the disciples who want him to send the hungry crowds away? He says, "You give them something to eat."

Did you also notice what he doesn't say? He doesn't say, "Well, you just need to go round us up some food." "He doesn't scold them for not trying harder, for not having more compassion on the poor. He doesn't complain for lack of more volunteers. "5,000 is a big number. If I only had more than 12 disciples." What Jesus says is, "You give them something to eat." Of course, the disciples are quick to point out that all they have are a few

loaves of bread and a couple fish. I can picture them holding those loaves and fishes in their hands, starting at them. What's going through their minds? "You know, we're pretty hungry too. Even if we did have enough to share, how would we even know where to begin?"

And this is where all four gospel writers pick up their pens and write the same thing: *And Jesus took what they had, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke it and gave it to the disciples to give to the people.*

It is just my opinion but I am convinced that what the church of Jesus Christ suffers from today is not lack of members or volunteers or fellowship dinners. What the church needs is not a more robust budget or more staff or more programming for youth and young families, as good as all these things may be. What the church of Jesus Christ lacks most today is a discerning heart—the ability to keep quiet long enough in one place so we might hear what God wants us to do next. We—and by “we” I certainly include me—we run around keeping busy, trying to manage and maintain the ministry of the church, and though we tell ourselves we ought to feel joyful and fulfilled, instead we feel empty and overwhelmed. I'm not saying this is always true. What I am saying is that it will always be true unless we keep a discerning heart, for only the discerning heart can give without fear of running out, because the discerning heart takes the time to sit quietly before Jesus, to ask, what should I do with what I have? The discerning heart trusts that no gift, when blessed and broken, is too small to share.

It is just my opinion but I am convinced that the most important work we have to do as a church is to show one another how to slow down and be quiet before God so we might pay better attention to the gifts we have already been given.

As a minister, I meet a lot of people on hospice care. When a person is on hospice care it means they have a terminal illness and have decided not to pursue any further life-saving medical treatments. Essentially, they are choosing to let both their body and time run its own natural course. For nearly every family, this is a decision that is often fraught with all kinds of complexities, as not everyone thinks or feels the same way about life and how it should end, or death and what if anything comes after it. Anyway, a couple years ago I was working for a hospice care agency when I received a call from a woman named Karen

who said she'd like to see a priest. I told her I wasn't technically a priest. She asked if I could bring her communion and if I used wine as the body of Christ.

"I don't want any of that grape juice," she told me.

I said I could bring wine and she said, "That's good enough for me."

On the day I went to see Karen she called me Father David and invited me to sit down on the edge of her hospital bed.

"Okay, what's next?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked her back.

"What happens next?" she wanted to know. "You're the priest, tell me, what's going to happen after...you know...I die."

I told Karen that I didn't know but that I was glad to come around often and sit with her until it happened. She seemed satisfied enough with my answer.

And so, a couple times a week I would go and visit Karen. We'd sit together, I would bring my guitar and we'd sing a hymn or a Neil Diamond song, whichever one Karen might have liked best that day. And always before I left Karen would ask for communion. The first time we shared communion, I took the loaf of bread and handed it to Karen to break off a piece.

"The Body of Christ broken for you," I told her.

She took such a little piece, tore it in two and gave half of it back to me.

"The Body of Christ broken for you," she told me.

"Karen, we've got a whole loaf of bread here. You can keep your piece. I'll get one of my own."

"But I thought the point was for us to share."

And that's how it went every time I went to visit Karen.

On the day she died her son Tony called to tell me and to ask me a question. "We're going to have a service for mom at the catholic church here in town. We were wondering if you might come and preside over communion?"

"I'd be glad to come," I said, "but I don't think it will be possible for me to preside over communion. I'm not catholic and technically I'm not a priest."

“Yes, mom might have mentioned that a time or two,” said Tony. “But she really wanted you to preside over communion because she said you would know how it’s supposed to go.”

I have often wondered if the real miracle was not that Jesus fed 5,000 people on a few loaves of bread and a couple fish. Rather, I think the real miracle was in daring to believe that with so little you could feed so many. “What’s this? Just a morsel, just a piece?” And Jesus blessed it, and broke it, and shared it, and everyone had their fill. And isn’t that the way it’s supposed to go? Amen.