“***Increasing and Yielding***” by S. Finlan, for The First Church, August 2, 2020

**Matthew 14:13–21**

13Now when Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist, 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. 14When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15When 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.” 16Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” 17They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” 18And he said, “Bring them here to me.” 19Then 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. 20And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

**John 6:14–15, 66**

14When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

15When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. . .

66 Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

**Mark 4:8**

“Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

The feeding of the five thousand is one of the few incidents in Jesus’ ministry that is covered in all four gospels. What we can see in all four versions is that his decision to work this miracle was a natural outgrowth of his compassion.

During this period of his peak popularity, he had been wanting to withdraw from the crowds, probably to think and pray about the death of his relative, John the Baptist, and so he sailed off on the Sea of Galilee, but when he landed, he found a crowd waiting for him, giving him no chance for privacy. Looking upon the people and listening to them, “he had compassion for them and cured their sick” (14:14). It is that same compassion that determines his actions that evening as the hungry crowds are still present. Instead of sending them out to the neighboring villages to try to find food, he tells the apostles to feed them, despite their limited supplies. They know they don’t have enough, yet they follow instructions. And this is when Jesus works his miracle: during the distribution of the food. Miraculously there is enough and more than enough.

I think this is the kind of miracle that happened only during the lifetime, and in the presence, of Jesus. It derives from his power as life-giver. He works miracles because has been the Life Giver from the very beginning. “Through him all things were made,” the Gospel of John (1:3) says. “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created” (Col 1:16). “He also created the worlds” (Heb 1:2). It is no great stretch for the one who created the world to also perform a nature miracle within it.

We may not understand the *how* of this miracle, but we can see the *why*. There would be families who might go hungry, unable to find enough food in the neighboring villages. Jesus takes care of their physical needs on this occasion. There is also symbolic value to this miracle. It shows that Jesus will provide for his followers. But his kindness extends to more than just physical needs. He knows they crave a leader, and that they need to be taught.

Unfortunately, some of his followers were only there for excitement and were not spiritual seekers. They wanted political results. John tells us how they were dazzled by the miracle and said “this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14), in other words, the Messiah. They were consumed with excitement about a hoped-for king who would arouse the Jewish people and overthrow the Gentiles. Some of Jesus’ apostles had this same hope. However, John continues, “when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (6:15). And it was not long after this that “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” (6:66). The ones who fell away were insubstantial, like chaff that blows away. They were more impressed with miracles than with truth. They wanted easy answers. They had a frenzy of excitement, but not any spiritual awakening or enthusiasm. His teachings did not sink in, with them. They just wanted bread and circuses. They also wanted to draw on the power that a miracle-worker can wield, but Jesus rebuffed that kind of power. He showed a different way.

Of course Jesus could have seized power in Galilee any time he wanted to. But he was not going to take on material power or become a ruler like all the other worldly rulers. Everything in Jesus’ behavior was a rebuke to the selfish and materialistic ways of most earthly rulers, including religious rulers who are obsessed with power and control. He told his apostles they were not to be like the so-called benefactors who “lord it over” others (Luke 22:25). “Rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (22:26), he said. Jesus was a servant leader when he fed the five thousand. He was not calculating to build his power. He was embodying a new kind of leadership, one the world had not known, and still does not expect, though it *may* know, in its heart of hearts, to be the right kind of leader. Jesus was not only compassionate but far-sighted.

He was not going to serve the short-sighted desires of the mob. He needed hearts that were receptive to truth; he needed good soil in which to plant his word. Using the image from the parable of the sower, I can say that those who wanted to make him king were like rocky soil. Spiritual truth could not gain rootedness in their hearts. As he says in the parable, they are like the plants that spring up on rocky ground, but have “no depth of soil . . . they have no root” and will not endure (Mark 4:5, 17). It is spiritual receptivity, not the eagerness for miracles, that makes one a true disciple. Spiritual receptiveness is the key.

It’s true for us, too. It is an openness to spiritual truth and growth that matters, not a belief in miracles or in miraculous interpretations of Jesus’ death. Jesus said the ones who are spiritually receptive “are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20). This thirty, sixty, hundredfold is an image of growth, and that is where he puts the emphasis. The people who stick with Jesus are the ones who develop a relationship with God, and experience spiritual growth. In the parable he calls it “growing up and increasing and yielding” (4:8). Through faithfulness, we can perform our own little miracle of continually bearing new fruit. The emphasis is not on believing (which can sometimes be mainly passive) but on bearing fruit, which is active. You are moved to share with others what you have discovered. You share what you love. Now the way may not always be easy but Jesus will indeed guide you through life’s obstacles.

Let us take this lesson home with us: taking in the word means taking in the imperative to grow and to yield spiritual fruit. It will also bring an understanding of servant leadership: the leader as the servant of all. Jesus served people by teaching and embodying the truth. We can allow Jesus to lead us into greater truth and understanding, leading us to yield spiritual fruits derived from the waters of life. This is the miracle that really matters, the miracle of transformed lives.

Recognize with joy that you are being transformed and that God’s grace and mercy are with you even now, today.