

Kingdom. Order. Realm. Existence. Gravitational force. Reality.

We've spent several weeks exploring the way, or the nature, or the truth of the world we occupy. There's the world Caesar seeks to portray, and there's the world God intends: the world that actually is.

Parables help illumine the difference in kingdoms: the kingdom of heaven, God's reality, is like a tiny mustard seed, or a little bit of yeast; items with little value in Caesar's world, and yet these agents meet basic needs in exponential ways: shade for a garden and bread for a banquet.

I think what I love the most about today's story (and there are many, many, many things to love about today's story!), is that we move away from parables and metaphors, and we move toward the experiential. In other words, Jesus makes the hypothetical a reality.

Don't get me wrong, I've loved exploring our texts the last few weeks (which to my count have included more than ten parables!). The parables, if we invest in them, allow us to see what's hidden in plain sight. And if I'm honest with you, before spending so much time with these Matthean parables, I always had a tendency to miss the forest for the miracle when it came to the feeding the many thousands (I'll say many instead of five because I think it's just as miraculous that women and children were fed, too!). My mind always seemed to get sidetracked by the mechanics and logistics of such an operation. I mean, really, the Bojangles on Randolph Road knows the Panthers have eight home games a year, and they've got at least a dozen staff, and freezers full of fixin's, and yet they are still overwhelmed by a few dozen cars in the drive-thru. Imagine a crowd in the thousands without any notice!

This miracle is so massive it diverts attention away from its strategist, and toward its outcome. Perhaps that's the main point of the story. Jesus, our human authority, or leader, or teacher in illumining God's kingdom, sure doesn't act like any authority we've ever known.

Caesar, in any age, makes it clear whose realm it is: Caesar's! Caesar, in any age, makes it clear who alone has the power to provide for and determine the

people's welfare: Caesar! Caesar in any age, after having done what's he's obligated to do, will remind the people of how well the task has been fulfilled, and he'll make sure to do so in the most public of platforms. On Roman coins, Nero made sure his face was on one side, and a loaf of bread was on the other, lest you forget who fills your plate. Two thousand years later, we cash stimulus checks with the president's signature; we have our drivers licenses renewed while standing under a framed photo of our governor, and we don't ride an elevator without seeing a photo of our state labor commissioner (shout-out to Cherie Berry!). And no matter your political persuasion – you might think the Federal government needs to do more, or you might think it needs to do less – each of us, in some way, believe that Caesar and his systems should be a source for aiding in our needs.

So imagine for a moment, what might happen if Nero rather than Jesus orchestrated this feeding? Perhaps there would have been a parade float with Nero in a mink cape, shooting loaves of bread out of a t-shirt cannon, as the hungry crowds toppled one another for a chance at sustenance; Perhaps a public address announcer would have reminded the crowd, "this bread brought to you by the Emperor;" Perhaps Nero would have told the crowd, "Remember, I alone can feed you, so don't cross me." And having successfully accomplished his mission, Nero would do a quick blitz of the Sunday talk shows, and then dart back to the palace, surrounded by minions, and most likely, the crowds would be hungry again tomorrow.

Now think about what does happen in the story. Jesus finishes another day of healing, and, preaching, and praying; he gives all that he has – his time, his energy, his compassion, his physical, emotional, social, and mental attention – to the people he encounters. And what does he do after offering such transformation? Jesus retreats to a quiet place to pray.

But the people desire more. So they follow him. And even spent from a long day, Jesus has not yet spent up his compassion. So he gives more of what he has. I think it's worth noting that the cameras aren't rolling, nor is this a district that's gonna reward Jesus with political capital for his efforts.

And here's another thing to notice. Most of the time, if you wanna draw a crowd, you better make sure there's something to eat: campaign rallies, fairs, BBQs, church gatherings, movie theatres, etc...usually, it's the food that gets and keeps people there! Nero lures the people to parades with loaves of bread, and pomp and circumstance.

Jesus preaches in the wilderness (the desert we're told!), late into the evening, and the people keep coming. Jesus is so captivating, and his words are so filling, the crowd isn't thinking about food. But the disciples are. And they tell Jesus that the crowds should be dismissed, in order that they might be able to go back into the towns and villages and procure supplies.

The Exodus image should not be lost on us. In the wilderness, the Israelites grumbled to Moses when the supplies got light; they were preconditioned to believe that only Pharaoh's infrastructure could quell their hunger pangs. Sure, the system was abusive, but it beat the alternative of starving. God responded by providing manna.

Here again, even in the presence of Jesus, the disciples are preconditioned to believe that only Caesar's systems can solve the issue of hunger. They are listening to the very wisdom of God, and yet they are worried about resources.

So this time, it's not a mustard seed, and it's not a pinch of yeast, it's a couple of packs of Lance crackers and a few cans of sardines. Jesus blesses the food, offers gratitude to God, and invokes God's presence and power in bringing about transformation. "God, here are the resources we've got," Jesus says, "Would you help us multiply them?" There is a balance of humility and faith and confidence. This is not about what Jesus is gonna do; this is about what God's gonna do, and what God has already done.

And then, Jesus uses the disciples to distribute the bread. In other words, Jesus empowers the disciples to do what he has done. And I imagine, the disciples empower the ones they encounter to do what Jesus has taught them to do. And everyone ate. And everyone was full. And there were plenty of leftovers.

And I ask you, how many leftover loaves do you reckon Nero had at his parades, and how many leftover stimulus checks do you reckon we'll have this fall? And I ask you, how many people will go unfed, even when Caesar has the best of intentions?

Is it really all that audacious to believe that a crowd of ten-fifteen thousand people can feed themselves, can acquire what they need, by sharing rather than hoarding resources? God created a world where a tiny mustard seed can become a shrub as tall as a large tree. And God created a world where a pinch of yeast can become a hundred loaves of bread. And God created a world where ordinary things can be transformed into extraordinary sustenance.

Surely each of us has an ounce of humility. And another of generosity. And still another of kindness. And of love. And of courage. And of faith. Is there not a spiritual photosynthesis or a theological fermentation that can occur in each of us, which would enable our minimal resources to have maximum effects? I don't want to oversimplify things, but every time we have a church potluck I am amazed that a few dozen dishes have the capacity to feed hundreds; collected spare change and canned goods and crayon boxes pooled together somehow provide an excess for our neighbors.

God has always, and will always provide us with enough. We don't need to read today's text to know that truth. But what today's text reminds us of, is that it's not Caesar who originates nor facilitates the resources to meet our needs. It's God. And God alone. That means the world we must strive for, the world we can live into, is steeped in cooperation: the acknowledgement that ours is a world where God's people and God's lands operate in accordance with God's nature and God's character. God empowers us to feed one another; God invites us to be full rather than stuffed; God transforms the ordinary, and the meager into the extraordinary and the abundant.

Jesus asked God to use the people and resources at his disposal to help meet the world's needs. He taught the disciples to do the same. May God grant us ears to listen, and eyes to see, and hearts to open, in order that we too might break bread, not for the taking, but for the sharing! May it be so, and me it be soon! Amen.