

St. Andrew Presbyterian  
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SATISFYING OUR HUNGER  
Matthew 14: 13-21

David Hume may well have been the most charming skeptic who ever lived. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1711, he died in 1776, the year the American Revolution began. Hume was rotund and witty, the life of every party he attended. Early on David Hume lost his youthful Presbyterian faith and became the one of the most famous skeptics philosophy has ever produced. It was my fascination with Hume that first led me to study philosophy at the University of Texas. He still fascinates me and I love to teach Hume in my introduction to philosophy classes at CNM.

Hume once wrote an essay about the irrationality of believing in miracles. Hume defined a miracle as a “violation of the laws of nature”. And he offered four reasons why no rational person should believe in such a “violation of nature”. The first is that no miracle has ever been attested by what he calls “men of unquestioned good sense, education, and learning”. According to Hume, only uneducated, gullible people believe in miracles. Second, it is just not probable that miracles would ever occur, since that would in fact violate the laws of nature.

Third, Hume asserts that belief in miracles arises from our love of the marvelous, the wondrous, and the inexplicable. Belief in miracles is not unlike our desire to be fooled by magicians. Finally, Hume says that religious people assert the truth of their miracles over against the miraculous claims of other religious groups. You end up with the absurd spectacle of dueling miracle stories championed by rival religious camps.

Now one central principle in skepticism is this: don't trust anyone or any assertion. Journalism students are taught this on their first day in class. And skeptical philosophers reinforce that caution. But that same principle can also be turned back on the skeptical philosopher. Maybe I should be skeptical of what Hume is asserting. How do we know he is telling the truth? I am reminded of what Woody Allen once said about extreme skeptics who claim that we cannot know anything. Woody Allen asks exactly the right question: “If knowledge is not knowable, how do we know that?”

Are we sure that miracles are a “violation of nature”? Perhaps there are other ways to describe a miracle, like the “finger of God” or an “unexpected intervention of the Lord.” And is it the case that only untutored

minds ever report miracles? And after all we have learned from quantum physics, who is to say what is probable and improbable in nature? Maybe Mother Nature has more surprises in her than we can imagine. And do miracles arise from our love of the wondrous? Actually if you look at the Biblical record, no one ever expects a miracle to occur. It would seem just the reverse—we seem utterly caught off guard by a miracle rather than anticipating it. And finally, the issue of dueling miracles seems rather inconsequential to me. Perhaps the Spirit blows where it will and miracles can never be confined to just one religious group.

I offer these thoughts as a way of getting into our text, the famous story of the feeding of the multitude. Now if you remember your Scripture, you know that miracles are primarily congregated around three groups of men. Not many women miracle workers in the Bible, I am sorry to report. These three groups of miracle workers are Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus, Peter, and Paul. Aside from those seven people, there just aren't a ton of miracles recorded. And the one who is reported to have performed the most miracles would be Jesus himself.

The Gospels report numerous miracles of Jesus. Needy people are healed of diseases and disabilities. Even dead people are resuscitated and given life. And Jesus shows himself to be the Master of the wind and waves in the so-called nature miracles. The feeding of the multitude, another nature miracle, has a unique status in the Gospels. It is the only miracle during Jesus' ministry that is reported in all four Gospels. In fact, Matthew and Mark report this miracle twice, which is called a doublet. In our text four thousand are fed and in the doublet five thousand are fed. I suppose it was so memorable that it just had to be told twice. Only one other miracle makes it into all four Gospels—the resurrection itself.

Matthew's version of the feeding of the five thousand is not so different from Mark and Luke. Jesus is in an isolated place on the Sea of Galilee, but the crowds pursue him nevertheless. After Jesus heals those who were sick, the disciples want to send the crowd back to their homes, since it is getting late. But Jesus says to his disciples something rather astonishing, "They need not go away. You give them something to eat." They report to Jesus their meager supply of food: five loaves and two fish.

So Jesus asks for their food and then orders the crowd to sit down on the grass. Then before them he takes the loaves and fish and looks up to heaven and offers a blessing. Then he breaks the bread and gives the pieces to the disciples and they distribute it to the crowds. And all eat and are satisfied. And to top it all off, they have twelve baskets full of broken bread left over.

Now I don't know how to rationalize or explain away this story. If you saw the movie "Millions", which I highly recommend, an ancient interpretation of this miracle is offered. It becomes a miracle of sharing where the offering of food prompts others to share what they had already brought with them. Reading the text does not give even a hint at such an idea. Rather the key to this text is that Matthew would have us understand Jesus as the New Moses. He finds the people in an isolated area, as did Moses in the wilderness. And there Moses asked for God's help and manna and quail and water sustain the children of Israel in the desert.

Jesus here feeds the people, as did Moses. Jesus "looked up to heaven", our text says. We are to see Jesus as seeking God's help to feed those who are hungry. I have no way of understanding the "multiplication" process. Really I don't. Who can? But Matthew would have us be as astonished as the disciples were. And as the crowd was.

No one could have anticipated this. It is utterly inexplicable. From the time I was in the third grade and acted out this miracle in my Sunday school class, I have had no way of understanding what happened. Any more than I can explain how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

This is a story of Jesus forming a new people of God on the seashore. Jesus feeds them and nourishes them. In John's Gospel, the feeding of the multitude leads to a huge misunderstanding. The people eat their fill and then want to take Jesus by force and make him king. As is often the case, the people don't get it. Jesus is not the man who would be king in the way they wanted. He rather would be the Bread of Life broken for the salvation of the world.

So I don't try to rationalize or explain away the feeding of the multitude. I confess I don't understand how it happened. But here is how I understand all the miracles in the Gospels: they are told from the point of view of the empty tomb. The resurrection is the ultimate miracle story in the Gospels. If that story is true, then the other stories seem more likely. If the resurrection story is false, David Hume is absolutely right.

But if Christ is risen, then the miracle stories have a much truer ring to them. Raising someone from the dead makes feeding a multitude more possible, after all. We stand before the mystery of the empty tomb and we stand before the mystery of the feeding of the multitude and all the other miracles of Jesus. It is finally the same mystery-the mystery of God's power and presence in the life of Jesus. The finger of God. The unexpected intervention of the Lord.

It is the same mystery we encounter at this table. Here we proclaim: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. Even here, even

now Christ comes in spirit and truth. The Christ who feeds our spirits here is the same Christ who fed the hungry at the seashore. It is the same Christ who comes to us in our need and replenishes us for our journey. Mysterious, wondrous, ever new and fresh, always filled with grace and truth.

Friends in Christ, the One who fed the multitude offers to feed our hungry spirits this day. Come to the table of our Lord and be fed anew.  
Amen.