

Matthew 14:13-21

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

God's Feast
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When I was still in my teens there was a friend in my "social circle" who was the freest spirit I have ever encountered in my life. Shortly after graduation, a group of us went camping, and even though this guy didn't have a dime to his name, or a tent, or a change of clothes, or anything even remotely resembling camping gear, he jumped in one of the cars, and he was ready to go with nothing more than the shirt on his back and his sunny nature.

His plan for the weekend, was to live on the providence of the universe.

It's kind of annoying when someone does that, not so much because the plan is flawed, but because of the monologue that goes with it. He landed in the same car I was in, and all the way to the campground, everything that came his way was a treat. A drink of water was a "water treat." A bit on sunshine on his back was a "sun treat." Sand between his toes was "toe treats." There were "wind treats," "bathroom treats," "napkin treats..." Every Single Thing that came his way was a treat. And to the rest of us it was annoying because it was *so over the top*.

But to this day I still remember him, and when I think of him there's always a little awe in the remembering. Because somehow, this guy managed to surf through the entire weekend on "treats," *and* I would venture to guess that he enjoyed himself more than anyone else.

When I remember him, I am reminded of St. Francis, and I don't know if St. Francis annoyed people or not, but I think he definitely had the potential. Sure, we call him a saint now, but the people who had to deal with Francis may have seen things from a slightly different angle. Francis *embraced* poverty, and like my friend, everything in life was essentially a "treat." Only Francis used highly elevated language like "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon," and he wrote beautiful devotions such as "Canticle of the Creatures."

For years, I've regretted that I didn't at least try to get to know the treat guy better, because now he seems fascinating – mystical even –

You ever notice how easy it is to miss what's standing right in front of you when it's standing right in front of you?

When someone is radically different from everyone else, our brains go to work trying to categorize their behavior...and we get so caught up in trying to pigeonhole them that we end up missing the gifts they have to offer.

And when they're living in a way that challenges our own life choices – loudly – well then we just want to find the nearest exit.

I'm guessing that mystics bump up against this kind of attitude all the time.

Because mystics do not play by the same set of rules as everyone else; they're not bound by the same set of conventions, and they just love to point out things that people don't want to see.

It's uncomfortable; it's challenging, and while you're in the presence of it, it's not very mystical at all – it's annoying.

But here's what's really weird – after they're gone, they linger – and we can't stop thinking about them – and before you know it they become mystical, magical, and privy to special insights that the rest of us only dream about. And then we turn them into saints...

Or, in the case of one man – Christ.

And I think it's worth pausing here to let this sink in...

Jesus wasn't Christ until long after he was gone.

Christ is a title. It comes from the Greek word "Christos," which was the Greek word for Messiah – or anointed one, and while he was alive, there was some speculation about possible Messiahship, but it wasn't until long after the crucifixion that it became official.

Two thousand years later, we Christians all agree that Jesus Christ is the son of God – our Lord and Savior, who came to set us free from our bondage to sin.

But Jesus the person, was not lauded by mainstream society. He was different; he was contentious; he challenged established norms, and he rubbed people the wrong way.

Two thousand years later, Jesus is the standard for our pursuit of love, peace, justice and righteousness.

But Jesus the person was not taken seriously then, and I guarantee you that he would not be taken any more seriously now by most people who claim to follow him.

Because it's easy to miss what's standing right in front of you when it's standing right in front of you, making you look at things you don't want to see.

(shift)

So today for our scripture readings you may have noticed that we did something a little different. We read two stories from two different gospels. That's right – I went against the grain. Traditionally it's one gospel and one Old Testament or Epistle reading.

But I decided on these two passages because I think they work well together.

In each story Jesus is hanging out with people. The people in group A represent the religious institution, while the people in group B represents the ones whom the religious institution *should* have been serving – but wasn't.

Both stories occur during mealtime, and that's always full of theological fun, because one of the things we love the most about Jesus is his enthusiasm for food and drink. He ate with Pharisees and sinners alike, and he even had his people food shopping on the Sabbath, which was in direct violation of the law.

We love mealtime Jesus; we love rebellious Jesus, and we especially love storyteller Jesus who would sit at a table with Pharisees and put them in their place with zingers wrapped in parables.

From Jesus' mealtime stories, we've come up with lots and lots of beautifully spun theology – where every sip of soup means something special – but from a more practical and organic level, I'd be willing to bet that the majority of his religious buddies actually dreaded dining with him because, well, he could be pretty annoying.

They did not know him as “Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior;” and they sure as heck didn't believe he was the Messiah they had been waiting for. To them, he was just some schmuck who didn't play by the same rules as everyone else. He was not bound by the same conventions, and he was continuously pointing out things no one wanted to look at.

It was annoying all right – but it became especially annoying when rumors started to spread. Rumors about how he was becoming popular with the outcasts – the ones no one wanted to see – the ones who were considered to be barely human – the ones society sacrificed to the machine of progress through their blood, sweat, and tears – and ultimately – their lives.

To the respectable religious folk, an annoying Jesus was one thing, but an annoying Jesus with a bunch of annoying followers was something else entirely. It just wasn't good for business.

So at the first meal, Jesus is in the company of a bunch of respectable folk who are all watching him closely. He has a reputation for breaking their rules, and they're looking to trap him and shut him down.

But at the second meal, we find him partaking with everyone else – meaning those who would not be welcome at the first meal – such as the poor, the uneducated, the common laborers, the beggars, the mentally ill, the diseased, the blind, the lame, the demon possessed, the women with no options, and of course those cursed tax collectors.

The first meal is at the home of one of the Pharisees, so maybe there are as many as 50 people present, but the second meal takes place outdoors with 5000 families in attendance.

At the first meal, Jesus is a snarky guest, reeling off parables intended to make people squirm; but at the second meal Jesus is the compassionate host; he cures the sick; he loves them, and come dinner time, he feeds them. All 5000 families – from 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish.

The first meal is “exclusive;” the second meal is “inclusive.”

The first meal is filled with landmines; the second meal is filled with compassion and love.

The first meal was miserly; the second meal was lavish.

At the second meal there are no airs to put on, no etiquettes to observe, no religious laws to throw a wet blanket on everything. All one had to do was show up and trust in the divine providence of the universe – and everyone – every single member of every single family, was fed until they were full. “Bread treats” and “fish treats” for all – *and* there were leftovers...

So I kind of see this feeding of 5000 misfits as the banquet that Jesus was talking about in the story he told to the Pharisees in the first story.

It just seems right that this be the banquet to which everyone was invited, but only the outcasts showed up.

“Bread treats” and “fish treats” for thousands and thousands of misfits and outcasts –

people who didn’t measure up to the standards of polite society –

people who couldn’t play by the same set of rules as the top dogs –

people who made everyone around them uncomfortable with their illnesses and their missing limbs and their open sores –

people who are annoying as heck in every time and place because they make us reexamine our values, our judgments and all our petty little ways of keeping certain people out and certain people in.

The “respectable” people make up lame excuses for not showing up to these events, but the misfits show up in droves, and they all get fed.

Jesus wasn't Christ until long after he was gone. We honestly don't know who he was. It took 40 years from the time of his death for the first gospel to be written, and it is highly doubtful that any of the authors knew him personally.

The gospels are not biographies; they are not historical accounts, and they simply cannot be taken literally. But they do point to a man named Jesus who is the best revelation we have of God, and when we hold the text loosely we can hear him still speaking to us today through the lines of human longing.

In life, Jesus disrupted and annoyed people; he tried to stir them from their stupor and awaken them to the glory of God's kingdom where all are welcome, all are worthy, all are whole, and all are loved. He exposed the fallacy of the institution by feeding people in open fields where there was always enough and everyone was invited to partake. He taught people how to locate and identify the real treats in life – birds in the air, lilies in the fields, love in the heart, and peace in the soul.

His message was, and still is, extremely threatening to religious leaders who believe they are the ones who dispense God – like a controlled substance – and they will, in every time and place, attempt to execute him in the most brutal manner possible.

But he lingers and we still can't stop thinking about him – because he is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the living Christ – Jesus Christ – Amen