

Proper 13 Year A 2026

Perhaps a sign of growing old is that, in spite of a lapsing memory, one begins to remember things. It was a cloudless Saturday in October; my father would be dead ten months later. The preceding June was when we had received the grim diagnosis. On this day he felt fine, and we planned a trip to my grandmother's farm, one of his favorite places. The farm is in a remote corner of Houston County....lush acreage along the Chattahoochee River. It was an exceptionally fine day....the smell of hay....a lithe breeze among the tall long-leaf pines....We were careful to place our picnic blanket away from where the cows had passed through a few days before.... I remember my father lying there in the tall grass with his eyes closed, a foreshadowing, it seemed, lying in the slanting Fall sunlight, absorbing the warmth of the noon day.... A moment of peace for him.... The gift of a day; and I had this awareness:....that this heaven about which we dream wistfully...this illusive lost Eden...is in truth so very near to us...alive among us, woven into the moments given to us... not lost... but present in our gatherings, present in our breaking bread together.... the peace that passes understanding.... And in such peace, what Hebrew scripture calls shalom, death itself is gracious, and natural and even noble...and that the gift of life for however long we have it, is worth living. I saw those things in the beauty of that day.

That day for me has over the years become a metaphor for God's kingdom, the kingdom of the heavens as Matthew puts it. Indeed we can't speak of anything that is true except by metaphor...those seemingly mundane figures of speech that point towards the mystery of life...they are the means by which we catch mystery's taste.... Not so much knowledge, but awareness; felt more than understood....metaphor, symbol, the means by which we glimpse the unseen. Artists know this....their constructs of images that quicken our imaginations, sending them soaring into the timeless and venerable mystery that hums ever so close....imaginings that bear the divine...the divine that is everywhere...alive among us.... "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," Hopkins writesbeautiful and fleeting.....beautiful and fleeting because heaven is that way.....and a meal is that way...beautiful and fleeting, transient... yet eternal in God's alchemy.

I propose that Matthew in this Gospel account of the feeding of the five thousand is giving us a metaphor for what the kingdom of the heavens looks like. Biblical scholars have spilt untold gallons of ink trying to rationalize this so-called miracle. There are those who say that Jesus actually performed this magic act; some godly slight of hand to amaze the crowd and prove his divinity... then there are those who say, well, others must have had

food there and were convinced through the model of Jesus and his disciples to share, and then the story grew, embellished in the telling and retelling; and still others who say that this was a symbolic representation of the Eucharist. This kind of stuff keeps Biblical scholars off the streets at night.

But I think what's happening here is that Matthew is giving us a vision, a poem....a shimmering metaphor for this kingdom of heaven that is in our very midst. So let's look at the poem: First, though this story in some form or another appears in all four Gospels, this is not an original story to the Gospels. Matthew is retelling a story from Hebrew scripture found in the fourth chapter of 2nd Kings. The story goes that a stranger gives the prophet Elisha loaves of bread and ears of grain, first fruits of the harvest. Elisha commands the man to feed the crowd. The man complains that there is not enough, but Elisha insists that the people are fed...and lo and behold a hundred people are fed and there is food left over. Any Jewish hearer of Matthew's story would make the connection. So Matthew is not being literal here. He is not giving us an historical narrative...Instead he is being typological....Jesus the type, Jesus the man of God like Moses and Elisha come before, a type who models a life of sacrifice for others. Matthew is speaking of the kingdom of God not as the magic kingdom, aloof in the heavens...but as a kingdom dependent on the people of faith living

compassionately and collaboratively lives of sacrifice. It is the disciples who do the feeding. Jesus here, no more than his disciples, metaphor, for how God's life is lived out on this earth that is also heaven:....sacrifice....love of neighbor....family meals...the kingdom come by our doing.

Another important contextual point to make is that Matthew has rearranged the order of Mark's narrative; Mark being the earlier of the two Gospels and Matthew's principal source. Matthew places just before this feeding story, the horrific and gruesome story of the decapitation of John the Baptist. These two stories are not side by side in Mark. Here, we have two contrasting stories of a meal: One in the lavish and murderous halls of empire, Herod's palace, wherein the client king is served the head of John on a platter; and the other meal where all partake and all are fed, and there is more than enough, and many are healed. So we have a description of God's kingdom up and against the capricious violence and lavish corruption of empire. Matthew is relentless in contrasting the evils of empire to the way of Jesus. The kingdom of God opposed by worldly power.

The context of this story is that food insecurity was the norm in first century Palestine. The Roman government conscripted crops from their occupied territories and used them for trade, leaving the people of these territories lacking for food. At its heart this story is a subversive indictment

of the empire, its greed and lack of care to the detriment of its people who depend upon the fruits of their own land. Some things never change. In our own land, a land of teeming abundance, food insecurity exists among the poor. Funds for Snap benefits, food stamps, are being diverted to the military industrial complex, to homeland security and draconian immigration control, and God knows what else; while billionaires become trillionaires. The problem, as it's always been, is empire. Power corrupts; and such power wounds first the so-called least among us, the powerless. There was a time when our government saw it as its responsibility to take care of our poor and marginalized... those days are slipping away.

So what does Matthew's poem about the kingdom of God tell us? First, that it is not about life after death... It is about now....that it is brought about by compassion as well as critique... compassion a visceral manifestation of empathy; critique in the naming of that which opposes such compassion.... Compassion engenders sacrifice, and it is through sacrifice that the kingdom breaks into our world....and the metaphor for sacrifice is a meal....a meal, a living metaphor wherein our bodies are nurtured literally...reconstituted for a life of service and purpose....a meal, perhaps the most mundane reality of our common life, in which each has equal portion, in which all are fed and thereby all are reconstituted for the way

ahead....the community restored in the sharing of the meal...All meals are first fruits of sacrifice to which all have a right...willing and creative hands transforming the common things of earth into sacred nurture....our meals quite literally are the source of life itself.... And twelve baskets were left over we are told....twelve, of course we know are the twelve tribes of Israel. So the image here, in this poem, is that through compassion and sacrifice an entire people are renewed, reconstituted, restored for the way ahead. Sacrifice that ramifies. This then is a creation story, reminding us of the ancient pattern... a poem about the world being made and remade, as with every meal taken. This is a story about the world being remade in the hands of God... and our hands....a world that is sustainable unlike the world of violence and the self-interest of empire. This is the new creation in which all will partake of the abundance brimful in God's worldthere is enough and even some left over in the way of Jesus....not magic, but the way the world is truly made. A world ordered by simple justice

The Eucharist, in the practice of the church, is metaphor as well, our sacred family meal, an image of sacrifice.... A symbolic act of justice....Know well, dear people of God, that at every Eucharist, it is our bodies and blood, there on the altar, blessed, broken, and given for the world's nurture.... Which means that we, no less than Jesus, are living

metaphors of God's love, metaphors of the divine life in earth....God's reign in earth is not super-nature, but nature both human and divine, one nature, alive and real and present... Brothers and sisters, may we call on our compassionate nature, the divine image within, that which points to the profound mystery of who we are and to the mystery of creation itself...living metaphors, we, bearing the truth of the universe to the world in simple acts of sacrificial justice....May we call on our compassion, and go forth into the great and harried crowd... into the great crowd and invite them to the family meal... and just give them something to eat... The gift of another day, and the timeless memory of heaven.