

Baskets and Baskets: A Paulin Devotional

Matthew 14:13-21, 15:29-39

Jesus feeds a huge crowd twice. He feeds a crowd of 5,000, and then in the next chapter he feeds a crowd of 4,000. And before this week, I never understood why Jesus performs virtually the same miracle twice, with slightly different numbers. But more importantly, I've never understood why the disciples were still confused and didn't expect the miracle the second time, when everything was unfolding the same way.

The fascinating thing with the two crowd feedings is *who* Jesus is feeding. When he feeds the 5,000, he is in a remote area outside Bethsaida (Matthew doesn't specify that location, but Luke does). That's Jewish territory. The miracle is astonishing, unprecedented and overwhelming.

When Jesus feeds the 4,000, he has left Jewish territory. He's moved alongside the sea of Galilee, in pagan, non-Jewish country—the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon, followed by the Decapolis (the Ten Cities).

He still draws the crowds. He still heals the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute....and people are praising the God of Israel. But three days go by, and Jesus calls the apostles telling them *he's* concerned. That's different. In the earlier episode, the apostles came to him.

They simply didn't expect him to do anything remotely similar. Because these were pagans, after all. Surely he wouldn't....

But he did, of course. He does exactly the same thing, for every one there, and this time they have seven baskets of leftovers.

It's easy to miss something really interesting here, reading in English! We simply read, with the first miracle, "the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over." With the second miracle, the "the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over."

In Greek, though, it becomes obvious. The baskets for the leftovers in the feeding of the 5,000 weren't the same kind as the feeding of the 4,000.

The first baskets were...lunch pails. Little Jewish lunch pails that all Jews travelled with to avoid being forced to eat risky food that might not be ritually acceptable for them to eat.

The second baskets? Huge. Ordinary Gentile provision hampers.

It really changes how you read the story. 12 little packages of careful religious separation, or 7 perfect hampers of picnic leftovers from a mixed assembly of new believers and followers?

People weren't just fed - barriers were broken by this second miracle. Jesus was opening doors, expanding his mission. The second miracle was nothing I originally understood:

It wasn't just a repeat of the first.

It wasn't about 1,000 fewer people.

It wasn't about fewer baskets.

It was big - it was brand-new. It was about expanding relationships and building the family of God where even his closest followers hadn't expected to go.

I think my biggest takeaway from this reading was to always be more curious. If a story seems repetitive, or something doesn't make sense - dig deeper. It's always worth it, to better understand what the Gospel writers are telling you. So much can escape us. We have a big gulf of time and culture to cross.

