

Bible Study Guide: Week of 7-27-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 14:13-21

13 Now when Jesus heard [about the death of John the Baptist], 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.

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It is significant that Jesus' miracle of feeding more than 5,000 people follows the murder of John the Baptist. In the previous scene (Matthew 14:1-12) we hear a flashback describing Herod's gruesome banquet. This King Herod is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, whom we first heard about in the beginning of Matthew's gospel as the king who sent the magi to seek the infant Jesus and who ordered the murder of male children under two years old. It seems Herod the son is following in the wicked footsteps of his father. In Matthew 14:1-12, Herod promises a gift to his wife's daughter. His wife prompts her daughter to request the head of John the Baptist on a platter. He grants the request and has John's head brought into the banquet.

The contrast here is starkly drawn between the kingdom of Herod—marked by death and dirty deals; a kingdom where a severed head is the “main course” brought out to please the guests—and the Kingdom of Heaven which Jesus brings. Jesus' kingdom is marked by everyone having plenty of food, as well as healing, teaching, and the abiding presence of Jesus and fellowship with him and one another.

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It seems that Jesus chose not the quickest route to the “deserted place,” but rather the most secluded and isolated route. Despite his solitude being interrupted, he reacts to the crowds with compassion and began to cure the sick ones there. After a long day of ministry, Jesus is not yet finished ministering. The description of the place as

“deserted” is literally “wilderness” or “desert.” It is the same word used to describe the place where Jesus was tested by Satan and the same word used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe the place where God’s people wandered on the Sinai Peninsula. The implication is that out of the wilderness, God brings God’s promises to fulfillment. Human beings look at wilderness and see only desolation; God makes a way in the wilderness. There are also numerous parallels between this story and the Last Supper account in Matthew’s gospel. First, here we see that both take place “when it was evening.”

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Thought the most practical solution to the problem of many people getting food in a deserted place is to send the crowds home, Jesus does not dismiss the gathering, but rather makes a way for them. Just as the Israelites in the Exodus story were tempted to go their own way and turn away from God, fleeing on their own, here the crowds are about to experience God’s provision in the midst of desolation.

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Here we see more parallels between Matthew’s Last Supper account and this story. Here, Jesus ordered the crowds to “sit down.” In the Last Supper account, Jesus “took his place” (forms of the same Greek word, *anakeimai*, are used in both places to mean “sit down” and “took his place”). In both accounts, Jesus “took the loaves/loaf of bread and blessed them/it and gave them/it to the disciples. Likewise, the crowds “ate” and “all” were filled. Meanwhile, at the Last Supper, Jesus tells the disciples to “eat” the bread and for “all” of them to drink the cup.

So what do we make of this? If the Last Supper is a “foretaste of the messianic feast to come,” this feeding of the 5,000 is the foretaste of the foretaste. Matthew strongly emphasizes the meal and banquet aspects of this gathering, tying it to the most prominent meal Jesus shared with his disciples, the Last Supper and, by extension, to the meal we know and share today, Holy Communion or the Eucharist.

Not only, though, does this banquet point us forward to the Last Supper and the Lord’s Supper, but it also points us back to Herod’s banquet and by extension the ways and customs of the broken earthly kingdoms we know all too well. It seems the Kingdom of Heaven will be fundamentally different from earthly kingdoms. The messianic banquet will be very different from the dreadful banquets that people like Herod often hold.

Further evidence of the welcoming nature of the Kingdom of Heaven comes in Matthew’s mention of women and children. Banquets in Jesus’ day were rarely open equally to women and children. In Herod’s birthday bash described in Matthew 14:1-12, for instance, Herodias’ daughter was considered entertainment for the feast rather than a guest. Women in that culture and age were often either considered servants or entertainers rather than guests at the banquet. Jesus and his disciples, meanwhile, feed 5,000 men as well as many women and children. The abundance and generosity of God rather than the age and gender of the guests becomes the primary focus of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

1. How does Jesus’ Kingdom banquet here compare with his teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven in the parables we have looked at over the last few weeks?

2. Why do you think Jesus gave the bread and fish to the disciples and had them distribute the food to the crowds?

3. When or where have you seen God provide for your needs during a desolate time or in a desolate place?