

Deeds of Power

Matthew 14:13-21

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Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

[Jesus] withdrew 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.

Jesus gathers crowds around him. They want to see him and hear what he has to say and perhaps be healed by him. Matthew tells us they come *by the thousands*.

I don't know if you've ever tried to plan a large event. Large event logistics are not simple. It usually takes months of planning. How do you get people in and out? Do you have enough portajohns and emergency services? And then there's the question of how you feed people. A few years ago, some joker tried to put on a music festival in the Bahamas that he called the Fyre Festival. 8000 people paid thousands of dollars each for what they thought was an exclusive VIP event; when they arrived, they found wet mattresses in ramshackle tents, no musicians. They were stunned. But it was one picture of the food served at the Fyre festival that seemed to sum the whole fiasco up.

[photo: cheese sandwich... for 5 seconds... then back to main image]

Pulling off large events is *hard*. But apparently no problem for Jesus. When the crowds got big, the disciples grew concerned—there was nothing around, nowhere for people to buy food, they told him. But Jesus takes five loaves and two fish. He blesses them and breaks them and gives them to the disciples, who then give the food to the crowds... and miraculously, thousands and thousands of people are fed. There are even leftovers.

Most commentators say that this miracle tells us that Jesus insisted that people be fed. Among the community of Jesus' followers, there was a practice of sharing food so that no one was hungry. This practice inspired a story that said, "around Jesus it seems like food appears out of nowhere!" It's enough for everyone and no one ever has to buy it.

This story about Jesus feeding thousands of people is one of the more famous miracle stories in the gospels. Our gospels are full of miracles. Jesus heals sick men, women, and children. Jesus casts spirits out that have been tormenting people. Jesus helps people who are blind so that they can see. Jesus calms storms. Walks on water. Raises the dead. One of the core affirmations of the gospels is that *Jesus makes miraculous things happen*.

I know some of you struggle with the miracles. If you do, you're not alone.

[Thomas Jefferson Bible]

This is Thomas Jefferson's famous Bible. He made it himself. He cut up a bunch of different Bibles with a razor blade and pasted them into his own version, without any miracles.

[back to main image]

I struggled with miracles, too. I couldn't believe they happened. My definition of a miracle was *something that goes against the laws of nature*. I don't believe nature's laws are broken, so Jesus, in my mind, was a great ethical teacher. I knew he said, "blessed are the poor." "Give to everyone who asks." "Love your enemies." "The greatest among you is the one who serves." That was my Jesus and it was enough. I completely fell in love with that Jesus and with the world that he paints for us. It's a world in which all of us treat each other with dignity. Compassion and kindness flow in and around us. No one is excluded or alone. It's a world in which everyone is cared for.

It was that vision of Jesus and the world that Jesus describes that motivated me, as a 22-year-old, to go to work in the nonprofit sphere after I graduated from college. I was set on living the way Jesus taught and trying to change the world for the better. I moved into a house in a low-income neighborhood in New Haven, CT. I founded a nonprofit and we worked with teenagers who were growing up without much in a community where it was sometimes hard to live. I also went to lots of meetings and got to know politicians and neighborhood leaders. I paid attention to how development works—how private dollars get invested, how public money gets spent. I saw how police work, how the juvenile justice system works. How schools and teachers function. I saw how gangs work. And because I had spent most of my life in white, wealthy communities, I also saw how different life looks through a child's eyes when your family doesn't own anything—and when the world doesn't offer hope that you ever will.

That organization did good work for five years. Then it failed. This winter, I went back to New Haven. And I drove around to all the communities where I lived and worked. Everything I had touched was ground up by poverty. There was no sign that anything I had done made a difference.

Over the years, since I was a young man who fell in love with the ethics of Jesus, I have changed in a lot of ways. One way is that I read the gospels differently than I used to. We all tend to read with our modern lenses, and our modern categories for the world, our modern ways of knowing. We call miracles "myths" and we dismiss them as "unscientific."

But as I read the gospels now, I see that they are stories that are all about power. Power is what makes things happen in the world. And for the gospel writers, the world was full of powers. Sometimes those powers were good—the rain fell and watered the crops. The fish jumped in the nets. That's power working for good. Sometimes power was harmful—your child would get

sick; the crops—or your eyesight—would fail. Sometimes the powers were visible: the wind and the rain on your roof, or the Roman soldiers keeping you in line and their tax collectors taking your money. Many powers were invisible—a spirit possesses the mind of a relative. God, the greatest of all invisible powers, chooses to bless you... or stays silent and you wonder if God is there. Powers are all around us in the gospels.

Into this world of powers walks this person, Jesus. And around him, powers are acting strangely. Things that were expected to happen don't happen; things that are unexpected do happen. Sick people are made well. People can see when they couldn't before. People who were outside of the community are brought inside again. Women and children are seen and valued. Religious customs are broken—but in a deeply religious way. Spirits are cast out—spirits of violence and fear are replaced by gentleness and love. Jesus has the power to heal what is sick and mend what is broken. When Jesus is around, there is power! And there is change. Lots of change happening around Jesus. People question what they have assumed to be true about the world—people's minds are changed. People we had assumed to be “not us” are now part of us. People I had assumed I was better than are actually like me. People I had been afraid of are now sitting at a table with me. What kind of power is it that creates change like this?

If Jesus has the power to change expectations, change our relationships and our way of seeing each other, change our assumptions about the way the world works, what else does he have the power to change? Let me put it to you another way: is it more or less miraculous to change the social fabric, to alter the way people perceive reality itself... or feed 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread and two fish?

Outside of this church, there is a refrigerator. It was put there by a woman named Latisha Springer, who decided it was not OK for people in her community to be hungry. People, she felt, should be able to go to a fridge and take food out. No paperwork, no justification, no questions.

That's not the way the world works. We think that should only receive something if you deserve it. Medical care, food, housing—you don't get that for free. You have to work in order to show you deserve to be helped.

Latisha said, “you deserve food because God made you. And God made you, and you belong to me and I belong to you.” That refrigerator is changing people. It is a deed of power. Or if you prefer, a miracle.

I don't read the gospels the same way that I used to. I don't see the world the same way, either. Our world is full of powers. Some help people and some hurt people. Some are visible and some are invisible. All around us, God's power is at work. God's power changes things. It changes our sense of who we are. It changes our relationships. God's power changes our assumptions about the way the world works.

There was so much power in Jesus. More than enough to make 5 loaves and 2 fish into a meal for thousands of people. Jesus made that miracle happen. Jesus still does.