

“Invitation to the Feast”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, August 2, 2026

Texts: Isaiah 55: 1-5, Psalm 145: 8-9, 14-21 and Matthew 14: 13-21

“[The story from Matthew’s Gospel today] is popularly referred to as ‘The Feeding of the Five Thousand,’ should perhaps be called ‘The Feeding of the Twenty Thousand,’ if Matthew’s conclusions, ‘apart from women and children,’ is intended to suggest that all the married men brought their wives and children to the wilderness meeting. This is the only miracle story recounted in all four Gospels. Its inclusion in John as well as in the Synoptic Gospels suggests that it was of unusual importance.

Because we are children of the Enlightenment, we tend to focus attention on the question, “Did it really happen?” Various proposals have been made to ‘explain’ the miracle. The most popular of these, people were so moved by Jesus’ generosity (or, alternatively, by the generosity of the boy in John’s version, John 6:9) that they brought forth the food they had hidden in their clothing or travel pouches, and it was discovered that, by sharing, there was sufficient for all. Another suggestion is that the meal was symbolic and spiritual; not physical but spiritual hunger was satisfied when each person received a miniscule fragment of the shared food. These are both edifying retellings of the story, but they hardly do justice to the story in the Gospels, which intends to report a supernatural event...”

Douglas Hare in his commentary on the passage continues to talk all about the historicity of the event but wisely indicates that there is something more theological to the meaning here, rather than arguing about history (Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew:*

Interpretation Bible Series, pgs. 165ff). With Dr. Hare’s help, I want to put together not only what all was happening here, but more importantly, what God has to say about inclusion. In all three of our scriptures this morning, God reminds us that God’s love is wider, God’s mercy is deeper, and God’s community is more inclusive than most Christians will ever accept. While we put up barriers, God tears them down. And, most telling, Jesus tells the disciples in Matthew’s Gospel, “YOU feed them.” Honest Christians must take all these

things into account while we decide who does and who does not belong to God and who is deserving of God's mercy and grace.

The first thing for us to consider in this passage is that the meal is fish and bread. Perhaps you don't know that "Bread and fish constituted the basic ingredients of a peasant's meal in Galilee. Jesus' miracle provides no cooked dishes, no luxurious fruit, no wine!" The first thing for modern Christians to consider is that this "miraculous meal" was a peasant's meal. What would Jesus be trying to tell us by providing a meal to all who would come, but specifically use the makings of a peasant's meal?

The second most important thing for us to consider is Jesus directing the disciples, "YOU feed them!" Although many ignore this statement from Jesus, he clearly intends to remind Christians then and now that we are "called to be Gods instruments in meeting the needs of others. In Matthew's Greek, the command is emphatic: "You, you give [the food] to them to eat! (vs 16) The prayer 'Give us this day our daily bread' requires active participation from those who wish to see it answer red." In short, we are not called to be spectators, we are called to be actively involved in the well-being, restoration, hope, feeding, and care of others. We don't wait on God to do it, but instead, we use our God-given gifts, talents, intellect...whatever we have...to do our part to make that prayer every week come to fruition. There are far too many Christians sitting on the sidelines wringing their hands at the state of the world. It has been true since the beginning of time that God desires partnership and participation.

Faith informs the idea that if we bring everything we have and all that we are to the situation, something good will come of it. “God uses what we bring, even if all we have to offer consists of five small loaves and two dried fish...no offering is too small for God to use.” I do believe that many of us sit on the sidelines not because we are impure of heart, but that we underestimate what we can give to a hurting world.

Perhaps what we can give most is not our things. Maybe what we can give most is our heart to be as inclusive as we possibly can. Did you note in this story that no one was asked their credentials. No one was questioned about their faith status or membership. No one was required to give a list of all their sins before they received from the hands of Jesus. There is a time and a place for such things, but in a situation of need Jesus doesn’t ask a lot of questions. Instead, he takes what we have and in the act of sharing makes a miracle. All 20,000 people there participated in this miracle. Few, if any, were mere witnesses.

But inclusion is often a bigger issue for us than sharing our material goods. We all struggle – if we’re honest—with including others. The saddest part is that often we use scripture to bolster our arguments that so and so deserves our judgment. We can produce a lot of reasons to exclude, but it’s a struggle for us to find scriptural basis. It’s even harder for us to find that basis in the life of Jesus. Our other two scriptures this morning: Psalm 145 and Isaiah 55 make the same argument for inclusion in God’s kingdom—and kingdom we pray will come to earth every single week. God’s answer to our prayer is: this is what the kingdom looks like, now you do your part to make “earth as it is in heaven.”

From the Psalm:

The Lord supports all who fall down,
 straightens up all who are bent low.
All eyes look to you, hoping,
 and you give them their food right on time,
 opening your hand
 and satisfying the desire of every living thing.
The Lord is righteous in all ways,
 faithful in all deeds.

What if we read that scripture and saw ourselves as the hand and feet of God? What if Christians—let alone all of humanity—took seriously “supporting all who fall down” and being the “you” who give them food right on time. What if we were righteous in all ways and faithful in all deeds? I know that is a higher call than we will ever reach, for our vision is flawed and our motives sometimes hidden from our own selves. But in a culture that likes to heap more on those who fall down—guilt, shame, judgment of every kind—what if we did something other than heap more on to someone who is down? What if we strive to give food right on time, even though we know that we won’t always get it right? What if we did our best to be righteous ourselves instead of worrying so much about the righteousness of others? Being faithful is not an easy thing. All we can do is our best and pray that God will find us partners in the mission for which we have been called. We’ll need forgiveness when we miss the boat, and we’ll have a “do-over” or six. There will be the person who takes advantage of us, but I guess right now my prayer would be that many more of us would spend the time we spend in judgment seeking instead a heart of grace. Don’t misunderstand me, this is as much a struggle for me as it is for you. And yet, we are called.

Our scripture from Isaiah echoes the same theme and perhaps lays it out even stronger:

All of you who are thirsty, come to the water!
Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!
Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!
Why spend money for what isn't food,
and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?
Listen carefully to me and eat what is good;
enjoy the richest of feasts.
Listen and come to me;
listen, and you will live.

This is an unusual invitation. The list of those to be included is not limited to people of social standing, not even to people of sufficient means to come properly attired. The only requirement is hunger and thirst. "In antiquity, banqueting was arranged to celebrate the completion of a new temple, and properly so, for upon the temple rested the hopes for prosperity of the whole land. What a concept! The center of faith concerned for the prosperity of all the land—no matter who occupies it!

In his commentary on the Isaiah passage, Paul Hanson writes:

In spiritual life as in personal, it is humbling to admit that the fault lies on our side of the relationship. It is comforting to blame the other. So human beings invoke logic: If God possessed sufficient power and concern, Jerusalem would not have been destroyed by pagans and we would not be exiles in a foreign land [or substitute your own logic]. At this point, Second Isaiah seems to sigh..."Your logic simply is incapable of grasping the truth, and you will continue to stumble in the darkness of your self-imposed doom unless you grasp in faith the higher truth proclaimed through the prophets,"

...Unless human beings cast aside their pride and smug confidence in their rationalizing defense of their position, unless they assume a posture of awe before the Creator of the universe, they will not get the point that opens up to them the covenant of peace, the point that it is all for free for those who confess the inadequacy of their own solutions and therefore desire God's thoughts and God's ways.

The funeral liturgy from the UCC Book of Worship reminds us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and God's ways are not our ways. It's an honest reminder that we are

not God, but at the same time God calls us to be something more. We are called to love a little bit like God does. We are called to challenge ourselves to see the humanity, especially in those who are “bent down” and in need. We are called to challenge ourselves to think deeper thoughts, to pray for greater things than just our material needs, and to be a part of a kingdom that we can only glimpse.

We are all invited to the feast – and I don’t mean only communion in a few minutes, or the picnic this noon—and yet may both of those events open our eyes to what God is all about. God is about a magnificent feast where all are invited, all are welcomed, all are fed, but most of all...all belong. What a contrast from what we hear of humanity and they we live. And yet we pray every week, “Thy kingdom come...”

May we be a part of the change God seeks. Let’s begin today. There are as many do-overs as we need, but the call is still to each of us. One step at a time. Becoming our best selves possible. Created in the image of God to be the hands and feet of Christ.

May we be as faithful as humanly possible, energized and empowered by the love of God that knows no bounds.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.