

The Feeding of the Five Thousand



*Matthew 14:13-21; Mark
6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John
6:1-15*

*Year A Proper 13 ; Year B
Proper 12 (Revised); Year B
Proper 11*

copyright © 2014
Freeman Ng
www.AuthorFreeman.com

Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2
▲	Jesus	▲	▲
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲	▲
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲	▲
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts	▲	▲
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲	▲
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲	■

Scene 1

James , Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Thomas

{The disciples are gathered at the edge of a large crowd listening to Jesus speak.}

Jesus *[from far away]* Consider the lilies of the valley! They do not sow. Neither do they reap. Yet, Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these!

Joanna He's much better now!

John Yes, he's back to teaching the crowd.

Thomas It sure beats those parables that nobody could understand!

James Hey! Some of us understood them just fine.

Joanna *[darkly]* Some of us understood them all too well.

James *[pugnaciously]* Are you taking another shot at the rabbi?

Judas *[jumping in suavely]* What she's saying is that our leader is a complicated man. A force of nature, as I've put it in the past.

Thomas That's exactly how I feel about him sometimes! Like...he's just too much for me.

John You're doing fine so far. You're a valuable member of the group, and we're glad to have you.

Thomas I just wish I could believe in him the way you do.

Joanna *I just wish he could have preached this way in the last town!*

John Who knows? Maybe it was something about the people there. Maybe he sensed they weren't receptive.

Joanna Weren't receptive? They came in droves! There were so many that he had to preach from a boat off the shore.

Thomas Yeah, but there are even more people here. There must be a couple of thousand at least!

Judas *Five thousand, I'd say.*

John Wonderful!

James *[argumentatively]* Is it?

Thomas Why wouldn't it be? The more people he can preach to, the better, right?

James Sure, but he already spent the whole day preaching to them. Then, when we try to get away so he can rest, they follow us to this island!

John It was his compassion for the people. He couldn't turn them away.

James Then *we* should have! It's our job to take care of him, you know.

Judas You have a point. We can't let him get worn down by their demands.

Jesus *[from far away]* Come to me, all who are weary or weighed down with grief, and I will give you rest.

John I'll go and ask him if he can stop soon.

Judas Do you think he's likely to? Maybe we should just start sending the people away right now, even while he's preaching.

Thomas I think it might be too late for that.

Joanna What do you mean?

Thomas Well, I was watching them arrive earlier today. They came across in just a few boats, going back and forth. It took a long time for the crowd to build up to this size.

James So? It'll just take them a long time to all go home, then!

Thomas Well, that's the thing. It's going to be dark soon, and I don't think they'll have time to all get back to the shore. They can't take those boats out in the dark, can they?

Joanna For that matter, can we?

James Damn it! We lost track of the time! This is getting worse and worse.

John It's all right. We can just stay here overnight if we have to.

James Can we? With maybe a thousand members of the crowd stuck on this side with us as well?

Thomas I'm sure we can persuade them not to bother the rabbi while he sleeps. And they'll be pretty worn out themselves. Most of them have been out here all day.

James I'm not talking about sleep. I'm talking about food! We have no food!

Joanna Food! I hadn't thought about it, but suddenly, I'm starving!

Judas I thought of it.

Thomas What?

James What do you mean?

Judas I thought of it. This morning when we were in town and making plans, I thought we might end up in some kind of fix like this, so I bought some. It's in my pack. It's not much, because I didn't think we could afford to spend more, but it should get us through the night.

Joanna Judas, you're a hero!

John I'm glad you're the treasurer!

Thomas But what about the crowd?

Judas What *about* the crowd?

Thomas Well, they'll be hungry too.

Joanna True, but - oh, I see! Things could get ugly.

John With the crowd? But they're just ordinary people. Good people.

Judas A mob is a gathering of good people with empty stomachs.

James [*decisively*] We should leave.

John What, leave the island? What about the crowd?

James What *about* them? If we stayed, there'd be nothing we could do for them anyway, except torment them with the fact that we have food and they don't. We should just leave while we can.

Thomas I don't know...it feels wrong.

Joanna And yet, I can't think of any alternatives.

John There has to be something we can do!

{*Jesus enters.*}

Jesus Something we can do about what?

James Rabbi, we have a problem. All these people won't be able to get back to the shore tonight, and they'll be getting hungry soon and we have no food.

Jesus Ah, but we do.

Judas We do?

Jesus Yes. After I finished my sermon, a boy gave me this.

{He holds out a small basket with some food in it.}

Thomas That's it?

James Rabbi, this is serious. The crowd's going to panic when they realize they're stuck here without food. They could become violent.

John *[thoughtfully]* Five barley cakes and two fish. It was probably his dinner. And he gave it to you?

Jesus Yes. He told me it was for the people.

Joanna Kids! You've got to love'em.

John Rabbi, what should we do?

Jesus Have the people sit down in rows. And find a large basket. And have faith.

Scene 2

James , Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Thomas

{Later that evening.}

Joanna Incredible.

Judas I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it with my own eyes.

Thomas I still don't believe it!

James The evidence is all those happy people. We fed them all!

John I wish I'd believed the rabbi right off when he said we'd do it.

Joanna When the basket came around to me, it seemed to have more food in it than we started with.

John Like the widow's jar: it never ran out.

Thomas And did you see those other baskets that started being passed around? Where did they come from?

James This was truly a miracle of God. *[to Thomas]* I would think you'd finally believe after tonight!

Thomas I must admit, belief does seem like the only option at this point.

Judas I wish the rabbi had told us he could do this sort of thing when we first joined him. Can you imagine the following we'd have now if we'd been doing this all along?

John But he's performed many other miracles. Healing the sick, even raising the dead.

Judas Miracles like that only affect the one you heal or raise, and probably their family. For the rest, it's just a spectacle. If it leads you to follow the miracle worker, it's only in the hope of seeing more amazing things. To win a person's loyalty, their commitment, their *love*, you have to meet their needs on a deeper level. Life and health when they're sick or dying. Or food when they're hungry.

Joanna Or forgiveness when they're weighed down by guilt. Acceptance when they're outcast.

Judas Exactly.

James *[good naturedly]* You're just upset because it turned out you didn't have to buy that food in town after all.

Thomas Oh, hey! If you've got it on you, I could actually eat a little more.

Judas Sorry, I lost it.

John What happened to it? Did someone steal it? Did you misplace it in all the chaos?

Judas I gave it up.

Thomas What do you mean, "gave it up"?

Judas *[sighing]* We were sitting in our rows and I was near the front. And the basket - the *first* basket - started coming around, and I was calculating when it would run out.

James You would!

Judas Anyway, I realized it was going to happen right around when the basket got to me! And I kept thinking about that little boy, how he gave up his own dinner, and I thought about what might happen when it ran out, how the crowd might react, and when the basket got to me, it was nearly empty, sure enough. And so I put our food

into it. Just tossed it in. 30 drachmas worth, just like that!

John Judas! That was a noble gesture.

Judas It was stupid, is what it was. It only delayed the inevitable - until it didn't.

James Your faith was rewarded by the miracle.

Thomas Actually....Was it really a miracle? Are we sure?

James Of course it was! How else could we have fed five thousand people with one boy's dinner?

Thomas But it wasn't just one boy's dinner. Judas put our food into the basket, too.

James Then it was a miracle to feed five thousand people with one boy's dinner and one man's groceries! That doesn't make it any less a miracle.

John Thomas, what are suggesting?

Thomas Well, Judas had some food that nobody else knew about, and inspired by the boy's example, he shared it with the rest of us. What if there were others who did the same? What if there were others who had food they were holding back, but when the basket came around, they put it in?

Joanna I suppose it's possible, but is it really likely? A lot of people would have to be carrying a lot of food to have enough to feed everybody. I don't think I heard any complaints that people didn't get their fill.

John Maybe people ate less than they normally would have. Maybe nobody wanted to take more than their share, or to be the one who emptied the basket. I know *I* didn't take much.

Thomas Me neither.

Judas I didn't take *any* food! I was so nervous about sneaking our food into the basket that I forgot to take any out!

Thomas So that was probably it. Other people with hidden food shared it like Judas did, and the rest took out as little as possible, because they didn't want to take more than their share.

James No, no, no! That was *not* "probably" it! First off, if people had food, wouldn't they have eaten most of it already? They were out there

listening to the rabbi all day. Secondly, we had twelve baskets of leftovers, didn't we? If people purposely took less than they really wanted the first time around, why didn't they come back and finish off the leftovers once everybody else was supposedly satisfied?

John Maybe more people than we'd guess had food. After all, if you're going to get in a boat to go to an island, you could be expected to plan ahead.

Joanna Even though we didn't! (Except for Judas.)

Judas But it would have been a lot harder for the crowd to plan ahead. I did because I knew what our plans were, but the crowd would have assumed they could return to their homes at any time. They had no idea they'd be stuck on this island.

Thomas Maybe it was the shame factor. We did make a pretty big deal about the leftovers, counting the baskets and holding them up for everyone to see. After something like that, who would want to break the spell?

{Jesus enters.}

Jesus Or maybe the little food that people did take, for being shared, was more filling than an entire hoarded feast would have been.

Thomas Rabbi, forgive me! I didn't mean to doubt you. I was not disbelieving that you could perform the miracle. I was just wondering if that's what really happened this time.

Jesus Thomas, I know all about your doubts, but don't be distressed. They're as precious to me as they are necessary to you. But beware! The day will come when I will ask you to let them go.

James But what's the answer, then? Did you multiply the loaves and fishes by your own power, or was it just people tossing in their own food?

Jesus I'll answer you if you'll first answer a question of mine.

Judas Ugh! You always do this!

Jesus Humor me once more! Which do you think would have been the more difficult accomplishment: for me to magically multiply the loaves and fishes, or for a crowd of strangers to share?

You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
www.WineskinProject.net/blog/feeding

Copyright © 2014 by Freeman Ng and the Wineskin Project

Freeman Ng is a writer, poet, and Google software engineer living in Oakland, California. He's also the author of:

- *Joan* - a novelization of the life of Joan of Arc
- *Who Am I?* - a personalizable picture book
- **Haiku Diem** - a daily haiku feed that's been going since July, 2010

www.AuthorFreeman.com