

“Can You Imagine?”

[Matthew 14:13-21](#); [Galatians 5:19-25](#)

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Earlier I asked the children to imagine what could be inside this box,¹ but what I was really asking is what’s outside the box. The feeding of the five thousand is a story about thinking outside of the box... and it’s no coincidence that the Jesus who is our savior and redeemer is also the greatest outside-the-box thinker in our faith history.

The feeding of the five thousand is one of the most famous stories in the Bible. It’s the only miracle that appears in all four gospels.² We remember the details—the disciples’ frustration, their insistence that Jesus should dismiss the crowd, the little boy who comes forward with his five loaves and two fish (although he’s skipped over in Matthew, he’s present in the other gospels), the 12 baskets of leftover bread and fish. We know this story so well.

Until we don’t. Which is how the Bible often goes, and that’s why we read these stories over and over, because every time we notice some new detail.

The story begins like this: “Now when Jesus heard this,” which means that it doesn’t begin here at all.

We’ve already missed the first act. “Now when Jesus heard this,”—heard what?

Heard about King Herod, not the one who tried to kill him at birth, this is another one of the Herod family.³ They’re hard to keep up with—like the Kardashians, and with a similar reputation for creating affluent, self-absorbed chaos—but with far more consequences. What did King Herod do? He took your cousin John—the one called the baptizer, who wears clothing from camel hair and subsists on a foraged and dumpster dived diet—and killed him.⁴

Everything that happens from here on out is a response to John the Baptist’s death. The feeding of the five thousand is a study of how God grieves. When Jesus meets the starving, sick, star-struck crowds, he is thinking of his dead cousin.⁵ He is

¹ A 3-foot tall cardboard box sat on the stage. During Children’s Time, we imagined together what might be in it.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3293>

³ That was Herod the Great (Herod I); the one who executes John the Baptist, and eventually Jesus, is Herod Antipas, his son. For a helpful reference on the Herod family (and also the Kardashians) see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_Antipas.

⁴ Technically, biblical evidence that Jesus and John are cousins are thin—they’re likely second cousins at best, perhaps more distant than that; but for the sake of streamlined oratory, I’ve used the word “cousin.”

⁵ It’s likely the crowd is thinking of this, too, see verse 14: “Now when Jesus heard this, 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.” That vague little “the crowds heard it” is usually interpreted “heard that

thinking of lives that end too soon and faces he will not see until he is in heaven and how short life is and what it means to live like you are dying and how would you live if you were running out of time? And facing this mob with all his deep grief, Jesus had compassion for them—and he doesn't just have compassion for them. This is the same word we kept running into during Lent, when we spent all that time in Matthew. The word *splagknidzomai*.⁶ Splankh-netd'-zoh-mai. It's such a great word. Maybe I'll get a tattoo of it. Remember what it means?

Jesus is moved to his bowels with compassion! He is punched in the gut by compassion. His heart sinks in his chest with compassion. He is shaken to the core from compassion. In the middle of overwhelming loss, he is moved even more deeply. How can he hold so much emotion all at once?

The feeding of the five thousand tells us about Jesus' grief—about the way God grieves. Jesus knows that John was in trouble with the law—John has been in prison since chapter 11, when Jesus had a long and somewhat fraught conversation with John's followers. And surely he's been getting updates from his mother and family and John's disciples.

John the Baptist is the sort of fellow who never does anything halfway—as we can gather from his extreme paleo diet—and so of course he is not in prison for just one thing, but for pretty much the totality of his existence. His existence is a threat. John the Baptist, as far as we know, doesn't work his own miracles, but it's his charisma and vision people are attracted to, his imagination and alternative lifestyle. John is the sort of person who disrupts business as usual.⁷

It reminds me of the summer I started college, my friend Claire, a year ahead of me, bought a van with her boyfriend, painted a powder-blue mural on it, and drove it from Seattle to Goshen in three days. The following semester, they rented it to Isaac Beachy, who moved out of the dorms and spent the semester walking barefoot around campus, dumpster diving, and showering in the rec center every few days. While this worked out well for Claire and Claire's boyfriend and Isaac, it caused some trouble for the college administration. If students got the idea that they could live in vans—or camp in tents, or generally bum around campus barefoot with questionable hygiene—it would throw off the whole system. An increase in Isaacs would cost money; who knows what the prospective students—much less their parents—would think. These are the sort of problems that John the Baptist

Jesus was there," but it seems as likely that it means "heard that the notorious prophetic troublemaker John the Baptist was dead."

⁶ The bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity. For more details on the word, see Blue Letter Bible: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G4697&t=KJV>.

⁷ and you can imagine the headlines that might emerge if it was a BuzzFeed: article "Baptist followers are killing the butcher's business"; "Why clothing sales are down in the Jordan River region"; "Zealous Judeans are killing bottled water economy." John the Baptist is the sort of person who ruins everything.

caused, something that so encapsulates the values the system professes that it actually threatens the whole system.

But what really got John in trouble was that he dared to call out the king, who had recently married his brother Phillip's wife. And so in a twist worthy of a soap opera, Herod murders John for pointing out that this feat is both troubling and illegal.

Everyone likes a rebel. How would you respond to see a good man—an innocent man—put in prison? How would you react if your cousin was murdered by the state?

In most action movies from *Kill Bill* to *The Princess Bride* to *Star Wars: A New Hope*, this is when the protagonist radicalizes and devotes his (her) life to exacting revenge on the person who caused them pain. This is when they began to chant the mantra “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

This is what the crowd is expecting Jesus to do.⁸ But Jesus doesn't urge the crowd to march into Jerusalem and protest; he doesn't agitate them to break windows of the courtiers' houses; he doesn't urge secession and creation of a new state. He does something more radical, more resilient, and more revolutionary.

Where Herod takes a life, Jesus gives life. Jesus says, “take a life and I will heal thousands of lives. Damage my friend and I will befriend thousands.” If the crowd has come afraid that John's fate will become their fate, Jesus assures them that Herod has nothing to threaten them with. Jesus assures them, in the words of the Salvadoran poet Julia Esquivel, “they have threatened us with resurrection.”⁹

In the words of one of her contemporaries in El Salvador, the Archbishop Oscar Romero: “As a Christian I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will be reborn in the Salvadoran people.” (And he was killed. And he is resurrected in the Salvadoran people and in the memory of the church.)¹⁰

Jesus' miracle is that John the Baptist is resurrected in this crowd of five thousand men, and women and children besides, and he feasts until he is full. In first-century Palestine, how many times would a subsistence farmer taxed by the urban royalty eat until he is filled?

Jesus throws down the gauntlet on Herod and the whole broken system, in the most subtle and unmistakable way he declares this man has no more authority.

⁸ For notes on whether the crowd is “having heard” Jesus was in the area or “having heard” that John died, see <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/07/a-gut-wrenching-gathering.html>.

⁹ This is also the title of the poem, originally written in Spanish; see <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/41552?stay=1>.

¹⁰ For more on Oscar Romero, see http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/anteriores/n19/19_hegil.html.

This week, I came across a poem that aptly describes the situation between Herod, the mourning people, and the hope of Jesus. As Hanif Wills-Abudurraqib writes in the poem “Hunger”:¹¹

There is not a way to rule without the knowing of where your family will get its next meal — rather, who it will be taken from, or who will become it. The dead, we know, do not hunger for anything but stillness. Perhaps their name sung around a fire by those still living...

Jesus sings the name of his friend with those who are still living, and he ensures that those who are living will live abundantly.

One of the side effects of sin is that it cuts off your imagination: if you are poor, you will always be poor and only poor. if you are an addict, you will always be an addict and you are only an addict. If you are an adulterer, you will always be an adulterer and only an adulterer. If you are haunted or stained or drowning in self-hate, sin whispers that that is who you will always be.

As Walter Brueggemann says, sin “create[s] a situation in which everything was already given, in which no more futures could be envisioned.”¹² The miracle of Jesus is that he looks at your sin and burdens—your worst description of yourself—and promises you can be something entirely different, you can be hope-filled and joyous and valued.

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Where the disciples see limited potential, Jesus sees abundant possibility.

But our faith is by nature imaginative. God the father is our Creator, God is from the get-go a force of imagination. And Jesus comes to us as the son of the Creator, the great imaginer. Sin tells us no amount of imagination will transcend our base nature. Sin tells us there is nothing to humanity but bitterness and deceit, that we are built to play out a game of thrones over and over. Jesus imagines a different world.

The amazing thing about this story is that Jesus upsets every entitlement program and coordinated charitable effort all at once. Where the Roman Empire and the Jewish administration had clear paths for charity, for when and how to give to the poor, Jesus blows it all out of the water in the most uncoordinated, imaginative social program. He gives out food and healthcare without checking credentials, without verifying need, without stipulating employment, he just gives. He sees a need that he can meet and so he does.

¹¹ See the full poem in *The Offing*: <https://theoffingmag.com/poetry/two-poems-by-hanif-willis-abdurraqib/>.

¹² Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 25.

We call the feeding of the five thousand a miracle story, but there is more than one miracle here.¹³ It is a story of miracles. Jesus does not just make food where there was none. Jesus makes healing where there was sickness. Jesus makes comfort where there is sorrow. Jesus makes friends where there is strangers. Jesus makes imagination where there was resignation and realism.

In the feeding of the five thousand, fruit of the spirit is in peak harvest—love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. But what is the fertilizer, the catalyst, for creating this where there is sorrow and fear? It is imagination. To grow the fruit of the spirit we need a little—or a lot—of imagination.

Walter Brueggemann, a respected Old Testament scholar, wrote about this in his seminal book *The Prophetic Imagination*. He argues that we are always living inside someone's imagination. In our own country, we live inside an imagination "satiated by consumer goods and propelled by electronic technology."

We live inside a consumer consciousness, and Jesus offers a counter-consciousness, a way of living that frees us from the pressures of consumption and wealth accumulation. The feeding of the five thousand is a story about the difference between what humans imagine... and what God imagines.

We know God is at work when we begin to imagine new things.

Remember when this congregation imagined a whole peace center? When you imagined not just one woman, ordained and pastoring in this congregation, but a whole church full of gender parity, where female pastors preached and congregations knew how to hear them? Remember when you imagined there was space in DuPage County for the refugee and the alien, how you imagined Vietnamese and Iraqi families enriching not just our faith but the lives of everyone from Lombard to Wheaton to beyond?

The Christian vocation is to imagine the impossible.

Imagine there is something inside this box here, something crazy and wild and abundant and loving and barely containable. What do you imagine in this box?

wait

A feast? A puppy? A dinosaur? A person? A canvas with new oil paints? A butterfly? A mirror? A mission? A ministry? A dream?

Maybe there's nothing in this box. Maybe the point is what we can imagine in it.

¹³ See <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-8a-the-real-miracles/>.

Let's open this box.

[box is opened on stage. It contains the Communion elements]

It's no accident that the most famous miracle of Jesus is a mirror of communion. The verbs used are the same ones. In the days after John the Baptist died, Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, just as he would on the night before he died. And Matthew 14:19 says, "Taking the five loaves and two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples. And the disciples gave them to the crowds."

How can the disciples sit at the last supper meal and not remember this moment? As Jesus passes them the bread and the cup, how can they not remember the way he gave the bread and the fish to so many? By the time he sits for his last supper, Jesus has already revealed his mystery—it just took the disciples this long to catch on.

Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." And after the meal he took the cup, gave thanks for it, and said, "Take, drink; this is my blood of the covenant poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins."

This is the body of Christ, shared with you.

[walk down, hand communion baskets to the congregation]

As you pass this basket, offer it to the person beside you: This is the body of Christ, shared with you.

I'm going to keep talking—don't mind me, that's just what I do. Go ahead and pass the basket and as you pass it, say, This is the body of Christ, shared with you. It's difficult to pass the cup—so you'll find these baskets have bread and grapes. You're invited to take a piece of bread and a grape (or just a grape), this morning as you remember Jesus's promise.

Remember not only the body of Christ, broken for you, and the cup of the new covenant, but the miracles of Christ, the abundance of God's love.

[return to stage]

This is the body of Christ, broken for you. The cup of the new covenant. The miracles of Christ, the abundance of God's love. It is one and the same. We can't understand Christ's death if we have not learned how he lived his life.

This is different than the way that we usually take communion—we take communion today as the crowd did, witnessing Jesus' miracles, his abundant work.

This moment is what Walter Brueggemann calls the Eucharistic imagination.

By imagination he doesn't mean unreal; he means undreamed. God has dreams for us. In the Eucharist, we see how God dreams, our dreams begin to fuse with God's dreams. Taking the bread, taking the cup, it changes what we know about God. And ourselves. In practicing communion, we practice resurrection, and we begin to imagine what the world looks like resurrected.

The Eucharist is a way of stretching out our imagination, keeping it fresh. Remembering that the world's imagination—the world that imagines war and poverty and abuse—the world's imagination is a limited imagination. In the Eucharist, we see the roaming, uncontainable imagination of God. We see the bold love of Jesus. We see the startling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Do this in remembrance. Remember that you were built to imagine boldly.

The act of communion is an act of confessing our ability to imagine. Imagine what we could do if we understood Christ was present, here. Imagine meals around the table. Imagine redemption is greater than what we ever believed. Imagine the love of God. Here is the body of Christ. Here is the blood of Christ. Take, eat.

This is the body of Christ broken for you.

This is the cup of the new covenant.

This is the hungry crowd, eating until they were filled, five thousand men and women and children besides.

Just imagine where we can go from here.