

Freedom spaces (Matthew 14:13-21; 18A)

## God wants God's people to be free.

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I have been living with Prathia Hall's thought since the publication of Courtney Pace's *Freedom Faith: The Womanist Vision of Prathia Hall* last year.

I had the privilege to spend time with Hall when I was a student at United Theological Seminary in Ohio and she was director of spiritual life. Anyone who knew her knows that she was a preacher of unusual and unequaled gifts and a prophetic spirit without peer. I have found her preaching and life to be a spiritual guide and challenge to the contemporary preacher.

Prathia's father, whose church she would later pastor, told her that "freedom faith" means simply that God wants God's people to be free, and God equips and empowers those who work for their freedom. That truth-filled idea has made me think about what should happen in my preaching. Preaching ought to be an attempt to create freedom spaces in the otherwise challenging and constrictive lives of our hearers. I understand this as my responsibility every time I do the work of preaching.

This writing gives me a chance to try out this idea of designing freedom spaces while thinking through the story of fish and loaves in Matthew 14.

**Circumstances.** All preaching should start with the circumstances, the real-life complexified contexts of the hearers. In this text, the crowd is comprised of people with food insecurity and no health care. They are hungry and worn by the day's event. It's time for them to eat, but there are so many of them that they would have

to go into “the villages” (note the plural). They might not have the stamina to get to the villages or the money to buy food. Jesus turns to the disciples and gives them the gospel impulse and directive: “You [the disciples themselves] give them something to eat.”

**Accessing of Assets.** In difficult circumstances, it can be easy to concentrate on our liabilities, deficiencies, and inadequacies: we do not have any; we do not have enough. Preaching ought to be about building capacity given the realities of our current assets. “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”

**Direct action.** People who hear preaching ought to be charged with doing something. Jesus takes the assets. He mobilizes and organizes the people to sit in manageable companies, and he simply blesses and breaks the fish and loaves.

**New Beginnings.** This is a new beginning for the disciples. They go from asking “What we do not have?” to being the ones to carry the abundance to the needs of the assembled people. They are charged with the distribution of food to everyone present. It is also a new beginning for the people. The people who arrived sick, tired, and hungry are filled—all of them, men, women, and children. And it is a new beginning for the community of disciples and the crowd together. They have a new challenge to think about: What do we do with what is now left over?