

August 6, Ordinary 18A (Matthew 14:13-21)

## **There are no ideal conditions for a miracle.**

by [Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue

Are you all professional mourners now?" My spouse asked me this somewhat lightheartedly after a friend and I participated in a funeral liturgy and were then asked—some might say “voluntold”—if we were available for another service later that same afternoon. It was a beautiful invitation and oddly enough quite fitting.

We laughed about it, because anyone even remotely close to me knows that I, a funeral home owner's granddaughter, research death, talk about death, think about death, teach about death, tell of my own encounters with death *all of the time*. Professional mourning—not necessarily of the public wailing and sackcloth-wearing variety, but in terms of offering presence and care—is part of my vocation. More than that, it is part of the vocation of the church as well: remembering our death while pursuing how it is we ought yet live.

This may seem off topic for one of my favorite stories in the New Testament, the various tellings of Christ's feeding of the multitudes. Its gravitas has always resonated with me, as it hints to the language of hospitality and love that I perhaps speak most fluently, to moments of deep community and fellowship. Whether planned or impromptu, the cookouts, potlucks, picnics, holiday tables, buffets, and charcuterie boards mark our gatherings of presence, abundance, and joy. Surely Ina Garten's garden parties are an early echo of heaven's banquet halls: it's about what it means to have a table prepared for you and to find yourself deeply satisfied.

But I am struck by the way Matthew's Gospel juxtaposes this miraculous occasion so starkly with grief. Jesus' cousin, herald, compatriot, minister, and friend John the Baptist, the one with whom he once danced together in their respective mothers' wombs, has had his unjust incarceration culminate in the death penalty. For greed and pleasure. John's head has literally been served on a platter, his severed body picked up by friends and buried, and Jesus receives the news and wants to be alone.

There are so many tender moments that must have transpired that the text is unable to tell us. The tears shed along the way, the cycle of emotions and questions as someone prepared the remainder of John's body, the lifting and moving and physical labor of a burial, the liturgies gathered and sung, even if cut short by the conditions of the state. I wonder how they decided who would tell Jesus. I wonder what they thought he might do.

What I am touched by this time in reading this story is not the gasping miracle of feeding 5,000 people but the deep mercy of it. Jesus hears the news about John and wants to be alone—a lesson in itself—but his grief does not close off for him the moments of compassion. And when the disciples tell the people they should go and make way for themselves, Jesus insists they remain gathered. Jesus requests the repast.

It's the most ordinary of reminders: that there are no ideal conditions for a miracle, and that even the occasion of the miraculous does not negate the contexts and emotions of life or pain or grief in an inequitable world. But also that meals are such a fond way to remember a friend, that sharing life is the first way we live into legacy, and that gathering nourishment is a way that we pass on peace. I wonder what Jesus thought as he passed out bread. I wonder if anyone came by to knowingly squeeze his shoulder. I wonder if tears were shared or laughter filled the air. I wonder if Jesus ate in silence or simply listened in on the conversations floating around him. I wonder if anyone made sure he remembered to eat too.

And I am reminded.

That even though the presence of death and loss in my life has forced me to learn to grieve, that very grief has forced me to learn to live. That there is something daily and deliberate to be said: to proclaim resurrection in a Lenten-marked world. That perhaps grief is forever, at least on this side of heaven. It may come in ebbs or flows, in moments of crescendo or quiet, malleable and sometimes so immovable that there is simply nowhere to go except through it. And yet, even in these moments, there is held out to us sustenance, provision, respite, and abundance.

Together, in Christ and with Christ, there is compassion—and there is, already, more than enough. It's a theology of the repast, that all might find their fill. A reminder to hold on to hope and a collective call to keep the feast.