



Reflection #18 Tabgha

At some point on the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, you will come to the question of miracles. Jesus healed many; he walked on the water; he turned water into wine. Each of these represent a category of action; each represents a deeply challenging question for many Christians and non-Christians alike: do I believe God changes our life through miraculous intervention.

One place where this question should arise is the Church of the Loaves and Fishes or Tabgha. Here we encounter an ancient Mosaic from the time of the Byzantines. The remnant of the original church was encapsulated and enshrined by a modern Lutheran church. Pilgrims come to Tabgha and remember the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5000.

Read the story to remember:

And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd;

and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?"

And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

Reading this story in New Jersey will be different than hearing this story in an ancient church on the Sea of Galilee. The first is more of an intellectual experience: what do I believe about miracles? The second is more existential: do I believe Jesus fed 5,000 people right here?

Tabgha is not the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with all the layers of history and the emotional dimension of death and resurrection. Tabgha, like most of Galilee, is very serene and pastoral. You are not led in awe to a sense of wonder here like you are at the Church of the Nativity, nor are you surrounded by a hundred mosaics of Mary like you are at the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. There is just a simple table, a bedrock stone as a shrine, and a Byzantine mosaic.

I believe the power of the place is in the simplicity. Do I believe Jesus fed 5,000? Yes. But I believe he fed them in a very mundane, simple fashion. He bid people to sit down; he broke bread; people ate. The power is in the way he had compassion for the crowd and met their need. He could have made this a show like Elijah with fire from the sky; he could have done something dramatic like Moses parting the Red Sea; but he didn't. There was no fiery furnace like Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego.

And, more importantly, the disciples express the very human response of "how is it we are in charge of this?" This question, more than the miracle, is what stays with me. Jesus had

compassion for the people and he fed them. He did something incredible, but in a very mundane way. I found the joy of simply responding with compassion.

This is the great gift I found in Tabgha. Maybe your gift will be different; maybe this will be a throw away moment where you are hoping to go to lunch. Hard to say.

As you venture there, consider this: where is your heart for the people? It is so easy to get lost in the enormity of the problems we face today and lose sight of very basic responses to what is needed. People are hungry. Feed them. Is your heart ready for such a direction?

A pilgrimage is a journey for which you must be prepared; a pilgrimage is a preparation for the life of faith we must live so to follow Jesus.