

The other temptations: *Matthew 14:13-21*

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [July 14, 1999](#) issue

I find it hard to believe that the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel could have fed the 5,000 in the wilderness without recalling his own temptation. The parallels are so striking: wilderness, hunger, a craving for bread. Of course, we cannot know whether Jesus saw the connections, much less the seeming contradiction between his refusal to turn stones into bread on the first occasion and his apparent miracle of multiplying five loaves into 5,000 on the other.

Nevertheless, for me at least, the story of the feeding of the 5,000 is very much a "temptation" narrative. True, there is no devil mentioned here. But if you look carefully, you can see many of the pitfalls that bedevil the lives of "spiritual people."

The first of these is the temptation to treat our spiritual regimens as inviolable. At the beginning of the story, Jesus has withdrawn from his ministry in order to "recharge his batteries." Then the crowd shows up with its hunger, spiritual at first and then physical. Their needs represent everything from which he is "in retreat." He does not turn them away.

As any busy man or woman knows, it requires something like ruthlessness to keep the sabbath, no matter how fleeting or figurative a sabbath one keeps. Exception leads to exception; answer one phone call and you'll answer ten. The trouble is that if we are not careful, "something like ruthlessness" can become ruthlessness indeed! We may shrink in horror from the "Old Testament God" who appears to strike a man dead for daring to touch the Ark of the Covenant in the second book of Samuel, but we can become just as terrible in defending the precious little arks in which we keep the tablets of our New Year's resolutions, the ten steps to enlightenment of our last self-help read. In Matthew's story, Jesus blesses the necessity of those tablets while reserving the option of smashing them on the ground.

The second temptation is that of regarding the lessons of our own spiritual progress as absolute. The map of my journey will be like the map of yours. When I was in the wilderness, the devil came to me and told me to make stones into bread. I told him that man doesn't live by bread alone; he lives by the word. See this hungry

multitude? What they need is the word. And a couple of days without grub wouldn't hurt them either. Didn't hurt me.

Obviously, Jesus avoids that temptation with striking and even "contradictory" decisiveness. Lacking five start-up loaves, he would not have surprised me had he picked up five stones instead. He does not presume to impose his temptation in the wilderness and his triumph over it on these hungry people. His eyes are fixed on the intensity of their need, not on the relevance of his experience.

I believe we are more prone to this second temptation than we think. Having identified it, we may imagine it belongs exclusively to those who "lack a sense of diversity," who make their Christianity a form of chauvinism. In fact, the absolutist approach belongs just as much, if not more, to those who seek a "synthesis of the different traditions" in some one-size-fits-all unified theory of human spirituality. Here's the all-inclusive system that all the great religious teachers taught, and that all sectaries and fundamentalists deny. If you question it, you must be a sectary or a fundamentalist.

The third temptation Jesus encounters in the wilderness is that of using limited resources and vast problems as pretexts for inaction. So many peasants, so few loaves. Take your five and withdraw even deeper into the Timeless Now, the Boundless Self, the Fathomless Fluff.

In contrast, Jesus' approach is to take the loaves and start the work of redistribution at once. It is this action that both characterizes him as a social radical and distinguishes him from most others who wear the name. Jesus seems to have no sense of "after the revolution"; his revolution is always now.

Perhaps we have been too preoccupied with determining the exact nature of the miracle to grasp the revolutionary nature of the sign. Did Jesus override the conservation of matter by multiplying the loaves? Or did he shame the conservation of a selfish few who were hoarding their loaves? As interesting as these questions are, they distract from the essential supernaturalism of the story. The feeding of the 5,000 implies a program that is out of this world in everything but its application, a program that refuses to rationalize complicity with evil in the name of evil's "complexity." In response to the "practical" question "What good will that do?"—one cup of cold water, one widow's mite, five loaves of bread—the answer Jesus gives is always the same. "Let's see."

There is at least one other temptation in this story, of course, and that has to do with waste. I'll rely on the eloquence of the 12 baskets of gathered-up fragments to dispose of that one. Here our subject is the paradox by which Jesus calls us to "come away" and be more spiritual while, at the same time, he compels us to question everything we assume under the heading of "spirituality."

A paradox indeed—but not a puzzle. Every so many months a women's or parents' magazine runs an article about the difficulty of "reviving your sex life after baby is born." As glib or fantastic as some of the advice may be, the quotations from new parents often make for a touching parable on the nature of authentic Christian spirituality. What they suggest is that the response to the hungry child in the night is as basic and beautiful as the hunger that conceived the child. And that both hungers, like the hunger for justice and the soul's hunger for rest, must eventually be satisfied, if for no other reason than that love demands that they be.