

Delighting in the story (John 6:1-21)

This week's Gospel reading is profoundly delightful.

by [Joanna Harader](#)

July 26, 2024

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

I sometimes use Ross Gay's *The Book of Delights* as a devotional. Gay's poetic essays nourish my soul and draw me to God. Holiness inhabits the practice of noticing and delighting in God's world and God's people.

And holiness inhabits the practice of delighting in God's word. Which, if I'm honest, I don't do very often. I generally approach scripture from a hyper-analytical viewpoint, interrogating it within an inch of its life. I come to the Bible with a professional agenda: What do you have for my sermon this week? Very rarely do I simply delight in the biblical text.

This week's Gospel reading, though, is profoundly delightful. So I invite you to join me in simply appreciating the sparks of joy we can find in this familiar story of Jesus feeding the crowd.

The first delight is the opening: "After this . . ." "This" refers to Jesus being harassed and grilled by his religious adversaries. So the fact that it is after this is delightful. Jesus goes to the other side of the sea. He decides he doesn't owe it to all of his critics to answer their loaded questions, that he doesn't have to justify himself to them. I am delighted that Jesus just walks away from these men who expect him to stay and engage on their terms.

The crowd also delights me. Thousands of people are following Jesus because they long for something they don't know how to find anywhere else—physical healing, spiritual revival, wisdom, connection to God. I delight in their unapologetic fandom, all of these people who have become Jesus groupies and follow him across seas and up mountains. And I also delight in their hope. A hope that is particularly unexpected and unjustified, considering the terribly harsh conditions that most of these first-century Jewish peasants would have lived in under the Roman Empire. How can hope like that not be delightful?

Philip delights me with his earnest and completely unhelpful answer to Jesus' ridiculous question. Andrew delights me with his (what should have been) equally unhelpful introduction of the boy with his lunch box. And this child deeply delights me with his extravagant generosity and utter cluelessness about how much food it takes to feed 5,000 people. It's like when a child offers to help their parents buy a new house by offering up their piggy bank. So sweet, so unhelpful, and so delightful.

Of course the most delightful of all is the miracle itself, that Jesus has the people sit down in the "great deal of [delightful] grass" and then proceeds to provide enough food for 5,000 people—with 12 baskets left over! Some people believe this was an absolute miracle—a banquet for 5,000 from five loaves and two fish. And isn't that delightful?

Others propose that the boy's generosity and Jesus' teaching inspire all the people in the crowd to bring out their lunchboxes and share food with each other. To me, this is no less delightful than an "outright" miracle. Any time people manage to create something together that is greater than the sum of what they could do on their own, I am delighted. I think God might be, too.

Do you know what else delights me? Based on this one act, the people want to make Jesus their king. I find it delightful not because it is a good thing, but because it is such a human thing—to overreact, to misunderstand. I imagine the lines of Eliot's Prufrock in the mouth of Jesus: "That is not what I meant at all; / That is not it, at all." This scene brings us full circle, which is, at least, aesthetically delightful: Jesus has to escape his fans in much the same way he had to escape his adversaries early in the story.

I am delighted that I don't even have space to talk about the delight of the stormy boat ride and the reassuring Jesus walking across the water. For all of the wisdom, assurance, guidance, and insight we can find in the Bible, I never want to neglect

the delight God offers through the holy and confounding words of scripture.