

# The Gospel As A Transforming Circle Of Story: Reflections On Luke 9:11-17

By Ched Myers

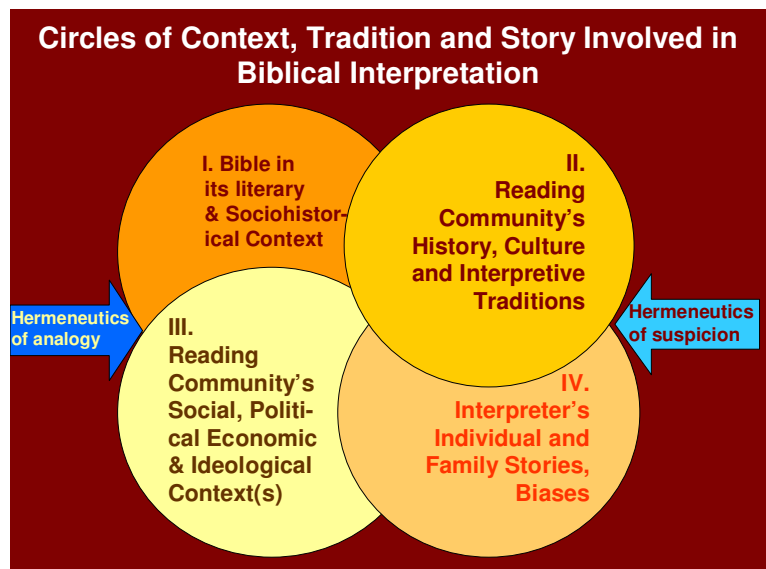
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Everyday life forms a commentary on revealed Scripture...and Scripture...provides a commentary on everyday life; life flows in both directions.”  
--Jacob Neusner

IN 21ST CENTURY NORTH AMERICA, the Bible lingers at the margins of our consciousness, both overexposed and misunderstood, fetishized by some and maligned by others, invoked in the culture wars and ignored in everyday life. Nevertheless, these old stories have survived every attempt to dismiss, banish, deconstruct or enshrine them. More importantly, they continue to demonstrate the power to comfort the afflicted, to afflict the comfortable, and to fire the imaginations of people around the world.

Bible stories have the power to challenge and transform hearts and minds within and outside of the church, but only if we reclaim them as a *people's* tradition. For too long the scriptures have been overly captive to the interpretive authority of a clerical/academic/dogmatic elite. I would like to propose preaching as an animating art that always seeks the connections between biblical stories and the compelling issues and experiences and struggles of *our* lives, in the conviction that all of these stories shape character, community and (God willing) history. In this spirit I offer some homiletic reflections on the gospel for June 17<sup>th</sup>, Luke 9:11-17, Jesus' "wilderness feeding."

When we approach a text, we must keep in mind that at least four circles of story open up immediately for the hearer, usually unconsciously (*right*). As implied by the diagram, the biblical story and its world often disappear beneath the more powerful assumptions that define the reader/listener's own context and consciousness. In the case of our gospel text, we would tend culturally to approach the "miracle of the loaves" with innate suspicion. This is because we are



profoundly shaped by the rationalist assumptions of modernity, and so immediately distance ourselves from stories of the “supernatural” in one of two ways. In order to preserve our rationalist assumptions, we might discount the story as primitive legend (bread doesn’t just multiply by itself), and if we take it seriously at all, proceed to “rescue” it by a spiritualizing interpretation. In order to preserve the “authority” of the text, on the other hand, we might acknowledge the “miracle” but discount our own capacity to embody such practice (amazing things like that may have somehow happened back then, but not in our world, and not by *my* agency). In either case, we have ruled out the possibility that the central exhortation of this story (“*You give them something to eat,*” says Jesus to the disciples, Lk 9:13) might somehow be directed at *us*.

My own personal experience can also overwrite the text (circle IV). If my life has been shaped by affluence and a class-nurtured ambivalence toward issues of deprivation, I might not “hook into” this gospel story at all. Even if I do connect with it, my notions of privileged charity (i.e. sponsoring an African orphan) may well distract me from what *the story* is trying to invoke. Foremost among these other circles, however, is the way(s) in which the biblical text in focus has *already* been interpreted to us, usually by some “authority” (circle I). Often we don’t hear the story afresh at all, but the tapes in our head of old homilies, or our own half-formed theological musings, or church doctrines, or neatly packaged spiritual lessons that lay tucked in the corners of our religious consciousness. Thus we will likely understand this feeding story as a sort of foreshadowing of the Last Supper Luke 9, because that is how it tends to be preached from First World Catholic pulpits. The story only *appears* to concern realities of hunger or issues of economic distribution (then and now); what it *really* points toward is the Eucharistic mystery of the Mass.

A preacher must anticipate and indeed interrogate these other circles of story in order to make space for the gospel to be heard. But the tasks of critical conscientization around self, society and tradition are more appropriate to ongoing discipleship formation in the community of faith than to a homily. In the context of proclamation I believe the best way to promote a focus on the gospel stories is to spend more time *telling biblical stories*, instead of immediately providing an interpretation of the text (which may or may not impact on the received interpretation). This will slowly nurture biblical literacy *and* enfranchise our people, who tend to feel more comfortable with stories than abstract theology.

LUKE’S ACCOUNT of the feeding in the wilderness is closely patterned after Mark’s (see Mk 6:31-44). As night begins to fall upon a large crowd that has assembled in the wilderness, the disciples urge Jesus to dispatch the people to the neighboring villages to provision themselves (Lk 9:12). Jesus’ response is blunt: “*You give them something to eat.*” While they agonize, incredulous and indignant at the prospect of having to deal with this situation of deprivation (6:37f), Jesus organizes. Determining the food on hand, he distributes the loaves and fish (9:14-16). A careful reading shows that the only “supernatural” occurrence here is that “all ate and were satisfied” (9:17).

There is a great deal of human emotion in this story, and we can solicit points of contact from those with whom we are studying this text. Have we ever felt despair in the face of overwhelming need? Have we experienced satisfaction and abundance in a community meal, such as a potluck? Do we harbor too much faith in the ability of the “market” to meet peoples’ needs, as did the disciples? These are ways to keep the reader/listener’s story within the circle of the Bible story. Then we can push deeper.

What has often been noted, and what fuels the traditional “eucharistic” reading of this story, is that the formula here (“Take...bless/give thanks...broke...gave...”) is common to both Lk 9:17 and to 22:19. But narrative common sense must question the assumption that we should read the *earlier* episode in light of the *later* one, when the opposite would be more coherent. In fact, the allusions in the wilderness feeding point back to several earlier sacred stories of the Jewish tradition—which provide a far more reliable lens through which to interpret our text than later Eucharistic theology!

The wilderness setting of Luke’s bread story alludes to the story of the manna, which represents Israel’s first “test of character” in the wilderness (Exodus 16). Sprung from slavery in Egypt, the people must now face the harsh realities of life outside the imperial system. The skeptical ancient Hebrews – like modern Christians – had trouble imagining an economic system apart from Pharaoh’s military-industrial-technological complex (Ex 16:3). The archetypal manna is thus presented as a parable that illustrates Yahweh’s alternative to the Egyptian economy. Bread “raining from heaven” symbolizes cultivation as a Divine gift, a process that begins with rain and ends with bread (see Is 55:10, Josh 5:12). As in Luke 9, the focus of Exodus 16 is not the “miraculous,” but the three instructions on how to “gather” (Ex 16:4).

First, every family is told to gather just enough bread for their needs (Ex 16:16-18). In contrast to Israel’s Egyptian condition of wealth and poverty, here everyone should have enough. In God’s economy there *is* such a thing as “too much” and “too little”—in contrast to modern capitalism’s infinite tolerance for wealth and poverty! Second, this manna should not be “stored up” (Ex 16:19-20). Power in Egypt was defined by surplus accumulation—after all, Israel’s forced labor consisted of building “store-cities” into which the tribute of subject peoples was expropriated (Ex 1:11). Israel is enjoined to keep wealth circulating through strategies of redistribution, instead of allowing it to concentrate in the hands of a few.

The third instruction introduces Sabbath discipline for the first time in the Bible (Ex 16:22-30). “Six days you shall gather; but on the seventh, which is a Sabbath, there will be none” (Ex 16:5,26). The prescribed periodic rest for the land and for human labor functions to disrupt human attempts to control nature and maximize the forces of production. Because the earth belongs to God and its fruits are a gift, the people should justly distribute those fruits, instead of seeking to own and hoard them. This Sabbath discipline (see Ex 23:10-11) is expanded elsewhere into a seventh year program of debt release (see Deut 15), as well as into the full-fledged economic restructuring of the Levitical Jubilee (Lev 25).

A liberated people's first lesson thus concerns alternative economic production and consumption! Moreover, this "Sabbath economics" is not portrayed as utopian idealism (as our contemporary capitalist skepticism would presume), but as a discipline that is fundamental to the identity of Israel. The exhortation to "keep Sabbath" comes here *before* the rest of the Commandments at Sinai, and is then reiterated soberly at the conclusion of the Covenant Code: if the people do not practice Sabbath, they will die (Ex 31:12-17). Sabbath is the beginning and end of the Law. Jesus' reenactment of this manna story in the Judean wilderness, then, is *economic* in character before it is *Eucharistic*.

But our gospel story is drawing on another old tradition as well: the "food miracles" of the great prophet Elisha (II Kings 4:42-44). The Elisha story takes place during a time of famine (II Kg 4:38), which in the Bible is understood not just as an unfortunate natural disaster, but as the result also of human economic systems of greed. Indeed, according to the old story of Gen 47:13ff, the Israelites ended up in Egypt because of Joseph's "management" of famine conditions to benefit Pharaoh's interests. Like the recent Honduran flooding, these are natural cycles that turn into social disasters because of political and economic conditions of exploitation.

Elisha encounters a scene in which local people, driven to desperation by economic breakdown, are forced to return to the ancient ways of hunting and gathering to survive (II Kg 4:39). But these folks no longer have competence in the traditional ways, since sustainable local economic cultures were destroyed by forced integration into the command economy of the empire. Thus these desperate peasants gather gourds that are inedible: "There is death in the pot!" (II Kg 4:40). Elisha "heals" the soup pot (4:41), and then turns his attention toward "bread." The loaves brought to him are made from "new grain" (4:42), inferring that they represent offerings of first fruits appropriate to the early harvest feast of *Shavuot* (see Lev 23:15ff). But while normally these firstfruits are offered back to God by the priests, in this crisis Elisha "redirects" them toward those in need. In a line Luke's Jesus will quote, he instructs the provider to "Give it to the people to eat" (4:42). Here the "Word of the Lord"—in contrast with the incredulity of those present, as in the gospel story—transforms a situation of scarcity into a celebration of abundance for all.

WE HAVE TRAVELED a long way through the rich fabric of scriptural allusion from Luke 9, and further from the Mass. Yet by following narrative paths back into the Torah and the Prophets, we have gained new perspectives on how to hear the gospel. Jesus' disciples tried to solve the problem of hungry masses by dispatching the people to the vagaries of "market economics" in town. But the prophetic tradition in which Jesus stands reasserts the primacy of the divine economy of grace and sustainable equity as the enduring lesson for the people. This vision animates a practice of wealth redistribution, whether by manna in the wilderness, or by Elisha in hard times, or by Sabbath debt release. It is *this* tradition that Jesus is "remembering" in a different wilderness in a different time, teaching self-

sufficiency through a practice of sharing available resources (or what we today might call “cooperative consumption”).

The real worlds of both Elisha and Jesus (and indeed of our own global economy) were characterized by widespread hunger and poverty that resulted from a feudal system of land ownership and from an extractive economic system that benefited the urban elite while disenfranchising the rural poor. In such worlds, economic practices of enough-and-then-some for *everyone* were, and are, miraculous indeed. The first Christians appear to have understood these connections. According to Luke, the inaugural account of the church “breaking bread” occurred on the feast of Shavuot—which in New Testament times was called Pentecost—and this animated a thoroughgoing communal redistribution of wealth (Acts 2:42-47)!

Perhaps we should “read” the Eucharist in light of this tradition too, rather than as a ritual that is all too often disconnected from the stories of both scripture and our lives. Eucharistic bread breaking stands at the center of the community’s life precisely because it invites us to “remember”—to remember the economy of grace practiced by our ancestors in the faith, and to remember what we ourselves must do to embody an ethic of equality in a world deeply divided between “haves” and “have-nots.”

We then complete the transforming circle of story in our individual and communal practices, such as a Catholic Worker soup kitchen, or the Jubilee 2000 campaign against Third World debt, or local advocacy for a living wage ordinance. A homilist could, of course, begin the circle of story with her own (or better yet, by soliciting) accounts of just such engagements, and work back to the gospel. Life illumines the text, and vice versa, and both bring animating power to the liturgical ritual. The sacred story, old and wise, *still* interrogates our world and our lives concerning God’s dream of equality and dignity for all. And our own hunger for justice returns us, time and again, to the circle of story.