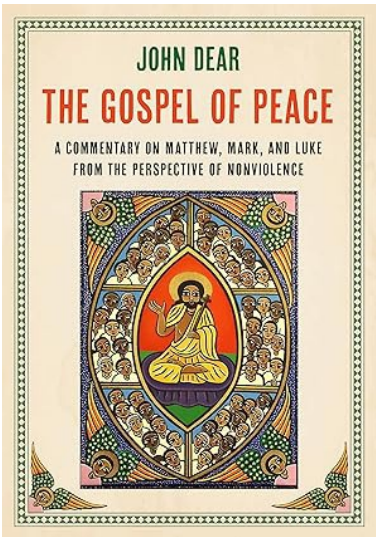
Excerpt Page from John Dear
Proper 13A — August 2, 2026

Excerpt from John Dear's The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence *(Orbis Books, 2024), pages 77-78.*

A Miracle of Multiplying Food or Generosity?



The disciples tell Jesus that they have only five loaves and two fish. He orders the crowd to sit down on the grass, takes the loaves and fish, looks up to heaven, says the blessing, breaks the loaves, and gives them to the disciples, who then distribute them to the crowds. "All ate and were satisfied," Matthew reports. "Twelve wicker baskets were needed to pick up the leftovers." Then, in classic patriarchal language, we're told that the crowd was made up of five thousand men, "not counting women and children."

There are two ways to look at this great miracle: the first way to approach the story is to accept it as the miraculous action of God in Jesus changing five loaves and two fish into enough loaves and fish to feed thousands of people. Jesus is the God who feeds the hungry and the poor, so that all are satisfied, so much so that he himself will become our bread. In this way, the feeding symbolizes the Eucharist, whereby Jesus gives us his body in the form of bread and feeds humanity. The invocation — taking, blessing, breaking, and giving — reminds Matthew's community that they are continuing the tradition of Jesus when they share the Eucharist together. It also fulfills the exodus story (Exodus 16) of the feeding of the crowds with manna from heaven. The problem with this way of reading the event, as we noted earlier, is that this is precisely the kind of magic, inhuman solution the tempter proposed to Jesus in the first temptation in the desert (4:3-4). Jesus rejected the spectacular miracle of turning "stones into bread" and instead demanded that we obey the word of God and do what God commands.

More and more scholars and theologians, therefore, are reading this famous passage in a new way, not as a spectacular magic act but as a spectacular miracle of everyone in the crowd who has food sharing it with those who do not so that everyone gets fed. This second way to read the story begins with the last sentence. The crowd had five thousand men, "not counting women and children." In this patriarchal world, women did not count, literally. If there were five thousand men following the holy rabbi, you can bet there were twenty-five thousand women and children. No woman, no mother, would traipse out into the wilderness with her kids without bringing food for the day. When the crowd is ordered to sit down, and they see the Master lift up loaves and fishes and break bread and distribute food, they in turn take out their own food and share it with all those around them who do not have any.

From this perspective, the miracle is that Jesus inspires thousands of people to share their food with those who do not have any so that no one goes hungry. That would never have

happened before, and it rarely happens now. The culture of greed has a tight grip on all of us; we hoard our food and ignore the starvation of millions. But in the presence of the nonviolent Jesus, we let go of our fears and anxieties and freely share our food and possessions with everyone in need, with no thought of service in return. But from my perspective, it would have been the faithful women in the crowd who followed Jesus and helped save the day.

But in light of the first temptation in the desert (4:3-4), where the tempter tells Jesus to turn stones into bread, and Jesus responds by announcing that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, we now realize that thousands of people have been listening to the word of God all day, and suddenly start practicing it and living according to it! Jesus has been teaching the crowd all day to show love and compassion to one another, to share what they have with one another, and, in doing so, to practice justice and equality and welcome God's reign here and now on earth. They are hearing the word of God spoken by Jesus, so when they see him share food with the crowd, they do likewise and share what they brought with the hungry strangers around them. This second interpretation is more consistent, then, with the whole trajectory of Matthew's teachings on faith, obedience, and nonviolence. The miracle is the free sharing of food with the hungry. In today's world of hunger, that miracle must become the norm of Christian behavior.