

“YOU FEED THEM!”

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Text: Matthew 14:13-21 (NRSV)

God’s Word: Exodus 4:2-5 (NLT)

I don't know about you, but there are times when I can get so overwhelmed, that, at least for a brief period of time--life becomes almost more than I can bear or deal with. All of us are in a tizzy these days. Do I send my kid to school? Do I homeschool? Even at church—we only required social distancing, but encouraged masks, and people said we were not being proactive. Now that the Governor has the mask mandate and we are all required to wear a mask inside a building that is not a residence, people are saying we are living in fear—which is far from the truth—we are following the law. It doesn't matter our response as your pastors, we can never get it to where we all agree on a decision. You can relate...Maybe you are dealing with 1,2,3 or 15 stressors at work and then something is happening in your personal life as well—it may be a situation that needs attending to involving an elderly parent, a child or a financial decision--you name it!!!

I don't know about you, but at times, something that is happening at home can affect my ability to do my best work at my job. At other times, stressful situations at work can ruin a weekend, time in the evening with Olivia, or even a vacation. Can any of you relate?

It's easy to talk about boundaries, but it can be harder to divorce ourselves mentally and emotionally from what is going on at work or home. And when there are stressors pressing us from several sides it's easy to feel as if we are standing on a beach, looking up hopelessly as a wave is about to come crashing down on us. I think we've all been there. Maybe you are there this morning. I think the disciples were there in our Scripture passage for this morning.

Here these words from Matthew 14:13-21 (NLT):

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Verse 13 tells us that *"When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew to a deserted place by himself."* And it appears that, either the disciples were with Him, or they were close by trying to be alone as well. And why?

They are in mourning. John the Baptist has just been executed by Herod. Herod was hosting a birthday banquet--feeding those who had no lack of food--when he decides to reward his step-daughter for her dancing by showing off to his guests. She can have anything she wants. So, at the urging of her mother, she asks for John's head on a platter. Herod goes through with the grisly execution, and there isn't a bit of compassion in anyone in that story.

But this guy, John, was not only Jesus' cousin--he was Jesus' predecessor as well. He had even baptized Jesus. And a number of Jesus' disciples had once been disciples of John. So, to say they are overwhelmed by grief is an understatement.

Jesus is bummed. The disciples are bummed. And they are trying to get away for a bit. They need some time off. Things are getting too overwhelming. They can't handle much more!!!

I want to stop right here and say in today's time with all that is happening in our world--COVID--and all that goes with it, racism, politics, and now natural disasters like hurricanes--it is easy to be overwhelmed and out of sorts. It is so easy to be at the end of your rope and struggling to tie a knot to hang on.

Friends, I want to personally say to you--it's ok to not be ok. For some of you, you may need to take a few minutes and walk around the block or do some deep, slow breathing. For others of you, you may need to do as Jesus did when life got overwhelming and go away for a bit--not forever, but just long enough to let yourself heal a little. For some of you, you really may need to call your doctor. All that is happening in our world can mess with the chemical balance in our brains and can truly throw us off kilter. It's okay to have medications that will help us regain our balance. If you need a space to talk, please know you are always welcome to contact us at the church. We would be happy to meet with you either by phone, by video or in person. Don't suffer alone. There are ladders, if you will, that will assist you in climbing out of your barrel. Now back to the story...

Even though Jesus has tried to isolate to give himself time to grieve, the crowds are following Jesus and His disciples. They've seen Him get in a boat and they race around the lake and are there waiting for Him--with all their horrible, terrible, burdening needs when He arrives!!! They need Jesus.

But rather than get frustrated with them...Rather than hold a grudge...Rather than tell them He doesn't have the time or energy for them--we are told that Jesus "had compassion for them and healed those who were sick." This ability to lay aside His own needs and offer compassion to others is one of the things that sets Jesus apart. It's also what ultimately gets Him killed, because it challenges the heartlessness of the powerful who ignore the needy in their midst and make no effort to alleviate their suffering--even though they have lots of resources.

After a day of healing, counseling, teaching and loving the disciples have probably just about had it up to here!!! They are grief-stricken. They are tired. They are stressed. And the crowds keep surging and surging. By the time evening comes there are "about five thousand men plus women and children" in this crazy, isolated and remote location. The more Jesus heals, the more people come. It just goes on and on and on.

Finally, the disciples get to their complete breaking point. It's getting dark, people are hungry, and there is no food!!! Would you be a bit stressed out at this point...maybe even a little irritable? Would you find it a little harder to be compassionate at this point? Would you be freaking out??? I would.

So, the disciples are in a panic. They come to Jesus and breathlessly, desperately say to Him: "This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the village and buy food for themselves."

But Jesus shocks them with this: "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat." There can be no doubt that big crowds with unmet needs tend to overwhelm us. If there had been only six people following Jesus when it came time to eat, it may have seemed manageable...a bit of an annoyance?...perhaps, but manageable. But a stadium size crowd of grumbling tummies is too much to handle!!! So, the disciples' pleading with Jesus to tell the crowds to "hit the road and get your own food," is a practical enough solution.

How many times are you tempted to tell the crowds of desperate people you see on the streets or coming to the doors of churches to "go away and buy food for yourself?" How many times am I tempted to do this? How often do I do this?

One scholar writes the following: "The scene is now set for a contrast with Herod and all structures of power that feel nothing for human struggle--and a comparison with Moses as well. While Herod feeds the well-fed, Jesus provides food for the hungry. But unlike the time of Moses, where God feeds the people with no help from human beings"--we're talking manna in the desert-- "Jesus does not do the work--or take the glory--Himself. When the disciples note the hunger of the people, Jesus responds, 'You feed them.'"

The disciples feel powerless and overwhelmed when faced with so much unmet need. So they plead, "Send the crowds away..." But Jesus' response is a call to action. "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat."

"YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT."

But the disciples reply, "We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish."

How many times have you felt God's call on your life, God's compassion come into your heart to reach out to the lost, the hurting, the sick, the marginalized...but as soon as that compassion comes flooding in, you look in your pockets or look at your watch or phone and say "I neither have the resources nor the time to do anything about this."

Then the moment passes. The light turns green. You see your chance to escape. You push the gas pedal, turn up the radio and try and succeed at forgetting about what God has called you to do?

We have a lot of churches in Crawford County. At the same time, our poverty rate is through the roof. New Beginnings Community Church next door has cars lined up sometimes 20 cars deep waiting on a box of food each month. People stop in here for bags of groceries and clothes and various other ministries across our city.

Even with so many churches, and so many ministries, the needs of our community seem overwhelming and like we have nothing to offer or not enough to go around. But the main message of the Bible is that we are to help the poor, the widows, the orphans. It's too easy to send the needy away, or to try and pretend they don't exist. It's so easy to look at what we've got and say, "It's not enough. Let someone else help them."

When the disciples say this to Jesus, Jesus' reply is: "You give them something to eat; you take care of them; you put your compassion into action."

But Jesus doesn't leave us alone in this seemingly overwhelming endeavor. When the disciples tell Jesus about the meager resources they have in the face of such huge need, Jesus says: "Bring what you got to me." "He ordered the crowds to sit down in the grass.

He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds."

It's been said: "Most Bibles give a heading to this story that reads something like 'Jesus Feeds Five Thousand.' And actually, Jesus gives food only to the disciples, who then feed the others.

While it's clearly the miracle of Jesus that feeds the multitudes, this does not reduce the call to discipleship to a call of being passive. Our call is to active ministry that meets human need. Jesus feeds the Twelve; the Twelve feed the five thousand."

Everything we need, we already have in our midst. Look at God's Word this morning from Exodus 4:2-5. God said to Moses, "What is in your hand?" God took what Moses had (a simple stick or staff) and used it for God's glory. When Moses released what he had, then God was able to use it and increase it.

When we come to the Bible, and to our worship service, when we send in our tithes and offerings, when we trust in Christ and Christ alone for our salvation, our joy, our peace...when we come to the Communion Table and eat the Bread which is His broken Body and drink the juice which is His blood poured out for the salvation of the world--we are fed. We are given spiritual sustenance. We are filled with the Holy Spirit. And we are then sent to feed the world. And in feeding the world, we are also fed. Faith without action is dead. Faith in action is alive--exciting, fulfilling, life-changing!!!

Finally, in spite of what seemed like nothing in the face of such overwhelming need, we are told that "Everyone ate until they were full." Ministry done within the will of God, is going to be fruitful. It will succeed. All we have to do is trust Jesus and do what Jesus calls us to do. That is an awesome responsibility, is it not?

God has entrusted you and me to be the Body of Christ--the hands and feet through which God's work is done in this needy world. It's no accident that Matthew tells us we will meet Jesus in reaching out to the "least" of our brothers and sisters--the hungry, the thirsty, and the imprisoned.

For those of us who would rather sit back in our Lazy Boy chairs this passage of Scripture can be rather uncomfortable. In the first place, it challenges our own heartlessness and our own failure to give ourselves to others even when it hurts. This event gives us a vision of compassion that we, as followers of Christ, are called to embrace and embody. And it's also a challenge to us to turn away from the worldly quest for power and plenty, and to renounce any callous disregard for the suffering of others. Finally, it's a challenge for us to offer what meager resources we have--our time, our expertise, our finances, our friendship, our creativity, our compassion--for Jesus to break them and bless them and give them back to us so that we can give them to those who need them.

And when we do this, there is always plenty left over for us. If anyone says that following Jesus is easy, they haven't read the Gospels. We human beings are often caught in a struggle to overcome our compassion fatigue, and the temptation to get overwhelmed and give up due to our small resources. And that's normal.

But, let's recommit ourselves to following Christ in such a way that we won't use our human weakness as an excuse to avoid taking our part in the feeding of the world, and in standing up against the powers that leave people hungry in the first place.

The events that took place on that hillside in Galilee 2,000 years ago were a miracle to the more than 5,000 people that day--probably closer to 20,000 people. But the deeper message is the miracle of God's love for the 7.6 Billion people on our planet today and the miracle that we--you and I--are called to be partners with God by having compassion on others and putting that compassion into loving action.

You feed them. You love them. You take care of them. And behold, Jesus will be with us, even to the end of the age!!!

Amen.