

“BRING THEM HERE TO ME”

Matthew 14:13-21

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As we pick up the story as Matthew is telling it, it has been a rough couple of days for Jesus. First, he is grieving because he just received the news that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been murdered by King Herod. And shortly before that, Jesus had preached in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth to some initial acclaim until the implications of what he had said in his sermon settled in on the crowd and then the people wanted to throw him off a nearby cliff.¹ (I am not nearly the preacher Jesus was but I have on occasion experienced the sentiment of that congregation!) Thus, we can comprehend why Jesus wants to get away for a while to mourn, to pray, and to recollect himself.

But the crowds who follow Jesus everywhere, spotting him on a boat heading toward what Matthew calls “a deserted place,” hightail it around the perimeter of the lake so that by the time Jesus arrives on the shore, a throng, a multitude, a great horde of people is there to greet him.

How would *you* react when all you want is peace and quiet and what you get instead is more of the madding crowd? If Lori were not here today, I could tell you I would be gracious and copacetic and receive the people with equanimity, mercy, and great aplomb. But that *is* how Jesus met the people. “*When Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.*”²

There has been through the years in theological circles a lot of talk and debate about whether the feeding of the five thousand really was what we think of as a miracle (and with the women and children not included in the biblical count it would have been at least twice that many that were fed). Some people think the great wonderment actually was that many in the crowd had held out

¹ Matthew 13:54-58 and Luke 4:16-30

² Matthew 14:14

on the others when the disciples asked who had brought food with them but that Jesus was able to convince everyone to share. It seems more credible to some than a supernatural explanation.

I have a hard time, though, believing this story would be one of the very few to be included in all four biblical gospels if the only thing Jesus did was to convince people to pool their food for a huge Presbyterian-style potluck. Why do we think that the God who created the heavens and the earth and everything in them out of nothing would have a hard time producing a dinner from a few morsels of food? As scripture several times affirms, “*God was in Christ*”³ and “*with God all things are possible.*”⁴

For me, the question of *how* Jesus multiplied the five loaves and two fish into a supper sufficient to feed thousands of people is not nearly so interesting or important as *why*. After all, Jesus had coveted quietude and rest. Why go to the trouble? Why go out of his way and why prolong the gathering? Matthew gives the answer: “*He had compassion for the people.*”⁵

The overarching message of the gospel is that God is like Jesus. When we see Jesus, we are seeing the human face of God. So, to me, the greatest and most hopeful sign to come out of this story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish is the indefatigable compassion of God for God’s people evidenced by the compassion of Jesus for the hungry crowd. Jesus always faces outward toward others in their needs. Not even deep grief and heavy burdens close off his heart and that may well be the profoundest teaching in our passage today.

Jesus shows the disciples and followers of his and every succeeding age that the primary hallmark of the Christian life is that we do not turn away from the need and pain of the world but engage it with compassion. We do not shut off our hearts in difficult times but keep them open in all of the seasons of our lives. Perhaps one of the ways we are comforted when we mourn, as Jesus promises us⁶, is by allowing our broken hearts to show compassion and kindness to others who also suffer and grieve.

Having spent a good part of his day healing and comforting the people who had come to him in hope and expectation, the disciples suggest to Jesus as evening closes in that it is time to send the people away. Maybe the disciples think Jesus is tired of the crowd and it is time for him to have the solitude he sought. More likely, it is a case of projection. It is a good bet the disciples themselves are tired of the crowd and want the people to be gone. The disciples tell Jesus it is

³ 2 Corinthians 5:19

⁴ Matthew 19:26

⁵ Matthew 14:14b

⁶ Matthew 5:4

time for supper and since they are in a deserted place, in the “boonies,” and thus there is no way they can feed the masses, it is best to send the people on to find food for themselves.

But Jesus, knowing there is no McDonald’s just down the hill, no Passage to India⁷ by the water, surprises the disciples by insisting, “*You give them something to eat.*” The disciples did some checking and return to tell Jesus there are but five loaves and two fish among the crowd and that is not enough to begin to satisfy the hunger of five thousand and more people.

But then Jesus speaks those timeless and life-changing words that echo down the years: “*Bring those five loaves and two fish here. Bring them here to me.*”⁸

“Bring them here to me.”

It is what Jesus says to parents who worry about their children or grandparents their grandchildren. There are so many pressures from so many peers and our children are with them more than they are with us. So many influences, so many temptations to face, and the world is so sophisticated and there are so many dangers. Parents often feel outflanked and overwhelmed by it all: “How can we protect and guide our children? We have only five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring them here to me.”

It is what Jesus says to an owner of a small family business who is managing to eke out a living but awakens one day to the news that Wal-mart is coming to town with “ninety thousand items under one roof.” “What am I going to do?” she asks. “Compared to that corporate Goliath, I am just a David.⁹ I have only five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring them here to me.”

It is what Jesus says to a husband in love with his wife when he discovers she is seeing someone who works in her office. He wants to save their marriage but she is “not wanting to work on things” just now. “He is so exciting and he really understands me,” she tells her friends as she thinks of her new lover. The husband despairs of his chances to hold onto his wife and to restore their marriage: “Compared to that Lothario, I have only five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring them here to me.”

⁷ A local restaurant favorite down the street from the church on the Susquehanna River

⁸ Matthew 14:18

⁹ The biblical story of David and Goliath is told in 1 Samuel 17.

It is what Jesus says to us when we tire of the gridlock, shenanigans, and polarization of politics in Washington as climate change, health care, immigration, nuclear proliferation, criminal justice, gender rights, racism, and many other issues important to the care and upkeep of a just society go unattended or are under attack. “How can regular citizens like us to go up against the empire?” we wonder. “We have only five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring them here to me.”

It is what Jesus says to us when life seems to be bigger, harder, and more confusing than we think we have the resources to handle and when feelings of inadequacy or despair begin to churn up our lives. “We have only five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring them here to me.”

It is what Jesus says to us after he tells us to “give them something to eat” or to do more than we think we have the capacity to do...when he commands us to love even when loving is difficult, to forgive even when we have been grievously wronged, to stand firm for justice even when it means standing alone, to bear witness to the gospel even when others may think us naive to do so or pollyanna-ish or out of sync with the dominant values all around. “We have only five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring them here to me.”

It is what Jesus says to the church when we think we cannot take on a project that appears to be beyond our reach or comfort zone or when our people resources seem too slim or our financial means too slender. “We have only five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring them here to me.”

In every instance, Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.” “Bring to me what you have even if you think it is not nearly enough. Bring what you have no matter how inadequate or insufficient you judge it to be. Bring whatever it is you can offer. Bring your hopes and dreams here to me. Bring your troubles and worries and hurts here to me. Bring your challenges and burdens and responsibilities here to me. Bring your five loaves and two fish. Bring them here to me.”

Whenever you feel as if you have only five loaves and two fish in a situation you think calls for much more, bring what you have, bring who you are, and trust that the One who filled the crowd on those hills long ago will have compassion for you, too.

I find it to be true in my own life that whenever I feel inadequate or begin to lose hope in a situation, whenever I think something is out of reach or near unto impossible, it is because I am focusing too much on how little I can do and too little on how much Jesus Christ can do.

Even if I have only five loaves and two fish in a circumstance that seems to require much more; even if the moral arc seems sometimes to be bending away from justice¹⁰; even if our politics are broken, repugnant, and reprehensible with only a “five loaves and two fish chance” of addressing the common good, there is every reason still to hope. Because as surely as Jesus told the disciples long ago to bring their five loaves and two fish to him - “*Bring them here to me*” - and in compassion he provided what was needed, Jesus also reaches out to us in ways as wondrous as the multiplication of the loaves and fish.

We are invited to believe and to trust that Christ Jesus can and will work in our lives and the life of the world to feed our hunger and thirst for righteousness,¹¹ to heal us, to bring peace and love and clarity and community. We offer what we have even if it is only five loaves and two fish and then we receive the goodness of the Lord. The story today does not tell us exactly *how* Jesus multiplies the loaves and fish to provide sufficiently for the needs of his people. It simply and assuredly tells us *that* he does it. It is in God’s portfolio to make a way where there is no way.

Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, gives, and pours out¹² and thus we never are short on the compassion and love of God. One of the reasons Christ invites us to his Table is to remind us of the loving largesse of the Lord. Why? Why does he offer himself to us? Because he has compassion for us. One of the ways compassion gets multiplied is for us then to go from the Table and live compassionately in his name. “Go and do likewise” is the way Jesus says it.¹³

Our prayer as we come to sermon and Table today - “Take, O take me as I am” - offers to God the “five loaves and two fish” reality of our lives trusting in God’s grace through faith that Christ will minister to us in ways that are more than sufficient for us. Thanks be to God!

Amen.

¹⁰ “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. paraphrasing Unitarian minister Theodore Parker.

¹¹ Matthew 5:6

¹² Matthew 14:19

¹³ Luke 10:37

