

**You Feed Them**

Matthew 14:13-21

You may not pick up on it right away, but the foundation on which this miracle story of feeding the five thousand takes place is Jesus' amazing depth of compassion and love. It may seem that that goes without saying, but it shouldn't. It is Jesus' love that permeates the setting, the action, and the message for us today.

Jesus has just heard the news that John the Baptist – his cousin, the “voice crying in the wilderness” who made way for his own coming, the one who baptized him in the Jordan river – lost his life because he spoke truth to power, and power didn't like it. When Herod began messing around with his brother Phillip's wife, John called him out on it. Herod wanted to kill him then, but John was a popular guy, Herod was an easily replaced pawn of Rome, and if the crowds rebelled at John's death, Herod would be out of a job. But, when he had a party and he was feeling pretty good, he made a promise to the daughter of his sister-in-law who was also his wife, and he had to keep his promise in order to save face with his guests. *He saved face; John lost his head.* And when John's followers came and told Jesus about it, in his grief, Jesus withdrew to what he thought would be a lonely place.

It was his love for his cousin and his grief over his death that caused Jesus to go to this place out in the middle of nowhere. It turns out not to be so lonely, though. Crowds of people are there to meet him when he gets off the boat, and, instead of having some time to himself to deal with his own pain, Matthew says he has compassion for them and cures their sick. Again, Jesus' love for others who need healing trumps even his own need for healing.

But then it gets late; they're out in the middle of nowhere with evening coming on, and his disciples come and say, *“Lord, it's getting late, there's nothing to eat, send the crowds away so they can go into the towns and buy food before it gets dark.”* He answers, *“They don't need to leave. You feed them.”*

Consider that statement for a moment. This would be the perfect excuse for Jesus to get rid of the people and have a little time to himself. He got in the boat and left where he had been because he wanted to be alone. Now, here is his chance. He's given himself to them all day; healed the sick; probably taught them. Now, with a perfect opportunity to send them on their way and have a little me-time, Jesus says, *“They don't need to leave. You feed them.”*

The disciples probably can't believe their ears. They're likely thinking, *“But, Jesus, we thought you wanted to be alone; now you don't want the crowd to leave. And, you tell us to feed them when we hardly have enough to feed ourselves – a couple of fish and enough bread for each of us to have half a piece... not to mention breakfast in the morning!”*

I think we're supposed to learn something from this brief conversation.

First, I think we're supposed to learn that, for Jesus and his people, it is not about us, it is about others. In spite of his own pain and grief, Jesus had compassion on others and met their needs first. When he had the chance to get rid of them – after all, he'd given them a whole day of himself – he still did not do it. This is not to say Jesus never took time for himself, but, it is to say, the needs of others came first for him, and, he seems to expect the same of his followers.

*They don't have to leave. You feed them.*

Second, I think we're supposed to learn that Jesus is deeply concerned about the physical, as well as spiritual, needs of the people in this world. Why is it that we Christians have such a hard time seeing that Jesus cares about both the physical and the spiritual in people? I have a lot of friends in the ministry and in the church who are so earthly-minded they're of no heavenly good. Do you know what I mean? Sometimes we call it the “social gospel” or “social justice” folks who are deathly afraid to affirm that Jesus is Lord of the world, but they'll quote you up and down about Jesus saying, *“When you've done it to the least of these you've done it unto me.”* For them, the Christian faith is totally focused on this world.

On the other hand, I know lots of people in lots of churches who are so heavenly minded they're of no earthly good. They think Jesus is only concerned about getting people into heaven, and you never hear a peep from them about Jesus' compassion for the poor and suffering in this world.

Why do we have such a hard time seeing that Jesus is deeply and passionately concerned about both our bodies and our souls? Why can't we see that he cares about the physical and the spiritual? Yes, he died on the cross to save our souls for eternal life in his kingdom. But he also healed people's

bodies, and it wasn't just as a sign that he had mighty power – he cared about people's bodies! He healed the sick and fed the hungry, and he told us to do the same.

*"They don't have to leave. You feed them."*

Friends, I believe it is time for us to hear this message afresh. I think Jesus is saying these very same words to us today. We are the disciples standing there in front of Jesus with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and Jesus is saying to us these very same words: *They don't have to leave. You feed them.*

We are tremendously proud of the work that Sally Tarolli is doing with the Red Cross. She is out there doing what Jesus said to do, feeding, sheltering, comforting, caring. What a perfect example of what Jesus calls us all to do, to put others above self and care about both the spiritual and the physical needs of others.

We are so proud of our senior high youth who spent seven full days in the Dominican Republic last month sharing the compassion of Jesus Christ in physical labor, medical clinics, and Vacation Bible School. They gave of themselves in ways I'm sure most of them have never given before, ways I'm sure they didn't think it was possible to give of themselves, and they came back with their baskets overflowing.

We are proud of our church members who serve at the Open Door homeless shelter, and who deliver Mobile Meals; who volunteer at the hospital, at the city jail, and all of you who save your pennies for three months to bring them in when we take up the Pennies for Hunger offering.

But, it is not enough. There's another side to the story. In the past three years, as we have all been hit by the tumbling economy, our giving to missions – that is, our response to Jesus' words, "You feed them" – has dwindled to an embarrassing level. In 2008, our total mission giving was \$78,000. This year it is only \$62,000. That's only about 6.5% of our budget that we are giving beyond ourselves. When you look at the budget report in the Presbygram this month, and you see that we are having a better year this year, and that we are paying our missions commitments, when you are giving thanks for that and feeling good about it, remember that we are only meeting the budget this year because we have cut it so deeply, and the primary place we made cuts was to giving beyond ourselves.

And in his compassion, Jesus said, *They don't have to leave. You feed them.*

A few months ago, Interfaith Hospitality Network, the ministry we've been involved in for the last ten years where homeless families have stayed in our church one week out of each quarter while they get back on their feet, they had to suspend their operations because of a lack of funds. Members of our church helped organize IHN a decade ago, and have been vital in keeping it going, but, they had to stop because churches, like us, have cut back in their financial support.

And Jesus said, *You feed them.*

For quite a number of years, our church had a relationship with Oak Hill Elementary, where our church members would go out and read to the students, we had lunch buddies where some of you would go have lunch with a student and develop a friendship. We collected supplies for the teachers. But, a few years ago, that fell by the wayside. As you know, two years ago, Oak Hill had one of the lowest test scores in the state and the administration and faculty went through a great upheaval. This year, Oak Hill had one of the most improved test scores in the state, but it wasn't thanks to us. They still need us. Ninety-eight percent of the students in that school live below the poverty level. They still need breakfast and lunch buddies, helpers in the classroom, people to help stuff backpacks with food, clothing for the kids.

And Jesus said, *You feed them.*

*But, Jesus, we only have these few loaves and a couple of fish.*

But, see, with Jesus, it's not about how much we have. Only whether we're willing to share it. When we are, it's amazing the miracles that will happen.