

Matthew 14:13-21

What a day that must have been for Jesus! The writer of the gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus had just received the message that his cousin and forerunner John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. Jesus had tried to go to a quiet place to grieve however people discovered his location and flocked to him. Jesus had such compassion on these people that he ministered to them. At supper time the disciples thought the people should be sent back to their homes to eat their own food, or into the villages to buy their own food. Jesus told the disciples they could feed the people.

Imagine how the disciples must have felt! What, you want us to feed over 5000 people? What are you thinking? We don't have the money to go buy that much food, and even if we did, we'd have to take everyone here to the market with us because there is no way we would be able to carry that much food back here! And would the market even have enough food in stock to feed all these people? Instead of plying him with all these questions, they combined them into one, asking him what they were supposed to feed the people. Jesus asked them what they had on hand. 5 loaves and 2 fish, nothing more. Jesus said, "bring them here and tell the people to sit on the grass." Jesus blessed and broke the bread, gave it to the disciples and they fed the crowds. Everyone had enough to eat with twelve basketfuls of bread left over. Can you imagine the disciples' surprise?

There must be something special about this miracle because you will find that all four gospels contain some version of the feeding of the multitudes; it is the only miracle Jesus performed that is contained in all four. So why is it special?

In Matthew's version the compassion Jesus showed even though he was himself in need of comfort is especially important. In the other gospels the miraculous amount of food that came from such a small amount, and the fact that Jesus told his disciples to pass out the food are important.

Compassion. The Merriam Webster dictionary has this to say about compassion: "*Compassion and empathy* both refer to a caring response to someone else's distress. While *empathy* refers to an active sharing in the emotional experience of the other person, *compassion* adds to that emotional experience a desire to alleviate the person's distress." Jesus responded to the people who needed fed both spiritually and physically, he showed compassion. So often we care that people do not have enough to eat but we leave it at that because we don't know what more we can do. A couple of things we can do if we feel compassion is to make a monetary donation to a food bank or put food into our own little pantry outside of our church. If you personally know someone is struggling to put food on their table, you can invite them to share a meal with you. Sharing table with people is a way of growing closer to one another as you have a conversation along with the meal.

Think about how many times the Bible tells us that Jesus sat at table with people. Sometimes it was with wealthy rich people, sometimes it was with poor lowly people, and sometimes it was with good friends. Eating together is important. There was a study published by The College of Family Physicians of Canada back in 2015 that came to the conclusion that when families eat together there is less chance of an eating disorder, alcohol or substance abuse, and violent behavior, as well as a lesser chance of suicide or depression in adolescents. The study showed that sharing a family meal increases self esteem and success in school as

well. It has also been shown that when adults gather for a meal on a regular basis, they build community and care for one another. Jesus knew something about this long before these studies were done; he showed compassion and shared a meal with the people who were with him on that grassy field.

And there were a lot of people with him! Matthew tells us there were 5000 men plus women and children. Think about the number of people at a packed concert at the Erie Insurance Arena... It holds 9000 people for a concert, and a little under 7,000 for sports events; the number for a concert is about the number of adults who were there with Jesus on that day. If you haven't been to the remodeled arena, maybe you've been to the UPMC park where the Seawolves play... it has a seating capacity of 6,000 people, most likely near half the number of people fed that day when women and children are included. Think about feeding that many people with three loaves of bread. And I don't believe the loaves of bread were very large. A typical loaf of bread was most likely 8 inches in diameter at the most.

It truly was a miracle that those small loaves of bread fed at least 10,000 adults. I've heard it said that this was the first tureen dinner, that all the people who had food shared it with one another, but I don't believe that. I don't believe the people who came, came prepared to be there the entire day. There's nothing to indicate this in the scriptures. It sounds more like they came without giving it much thought other than going to see Jesus. And Jesus gave them what they needed. He cured their ills, he fed them spiritually, and he took care of their physical hunger as well.

When we think we don't have enough to make a dent in world hunger, (which of course we don't, but Jesus does), all it takes is to give up a little bit. Jesus can do so much with so little. It reminds me of the story of the young man tossing stranded starfish back into the ocean. The old man told the younger one that he really wasn't making much of a difference. The younger man picked up a starfish and tossed it into the ocean saying, "It made a difference to this one."

Yet I can't imagine what the disciples must have thought when Jesus directed them to feed the multitude with those three small loaves of bread. Notice, all Jesus did was pray over the food and break it, he didn't engage in passing it out, he told his disciples to do that. This shows us that we have a part in spreading the kingdom of God. Even when it seems as though we have a tiny amount to work with, when we trust in the Holy Spirit great things can be accomplished. Remember last week's mustard seed? The teeny tiny seed grew into a huge bush. In the mid nineteenth century George Müller, a minister from Prussia, had a vision to build orphanages in England. Starting with only two shillings, about 24 cents in American currency, and without making a public request for financial help, Müller prayed in millions of dollars and built orphanages that could house 2,000 children. His humble beginnings led to great fruitfulness in his ministry. Two shillings, a vision from God, humility that never faltered, and much faith — once again, amazing things for God can come from what appears to be a hopeless starting point when we are willing to take a leap of faith and do what God asks of us.

What an amazing miracle Jesus performed in that deserted place. He showed compassion, he used a tiny bit to create a meal for thousands, and he gave us an incentive to try to do more than we think we are able to do when we are doing it with the Lord's blessing. What an amazing God we serve!

All glory be to God.