**Five Loaves and Two Fish…and Jesus**

**Compassion and Healing vv. 13-14**

Want to get away? That was the question posed by a series of commercials depicting people in embarrassing situations which made them wish they could disappear. I’m sure we’ve each had at least one of those moments. Maybe you’ve had a wardrobe malfunction, or gotten the giggles at a funeral, or had a toilet paper streamer trailing behind you. One of my more embarrassing moments came when I was in college and working two jobs to make ends meet. Classes, homework and jobs didn’t leave a lot of time for regular sleep. One day I dozed off in class, only to wake up because the professor had called on me to ask for my thoughts on the discussion. I had no idea what had been said, of course, and had to confess that I’d dozed off and hadn’t heard the question. Unfortunately, since the class was only half way over, not only could I not get away, but I also had to stay awake.

In our reading today Jesus has gone by boat across the Sea of Galilee to a lonely place to get away. The text doesn’t give a detailed explanation about how he was feeling, but in looking at the previous verses, we know that Jesus has received what we would call a one-two punch: he has been rejected by his hometown, and he has heard the news about the death of John the Baptist. No doubt, he’s hurting and grieving. Some sources suggest he is on the run from Herod. But if that is the case, he’s not flying very low below the radar, as he is seen, and the news of his departure spreads through the area like seeds scattered by a proverbial sower. When Jesus arrives for his retreat he is greeted by large crowds, possibly numbering more than ten thousand, if you count more than just the men. I wonder what kind of a reception they gave him – was there loud clamoring? Curious murmuring? Perhaps the crowds were subdued, also in mourning over John, as many may have heard him preach, and even been baptized by him. Whatever their welcome, Jesus’ plan is interrupted.

For someone looking forward to alone time, to peace and quiet, to getting away from it all, the response of Jesus is amazing: his heart went out to them; he had compassion. The English equivalent to the Greek word used here for compassion is *gut-wrenching pain.*  Leaving was not an option, not because he didn’t have the means – the boat was still there, after all – he could still turn around and sail away. But Jesus has gut-wrenching compassion for the crowds, and he stays and heals all who are weak in body and, perhaps, poor in spirit.

**Conversation with Disciples vv. 15-18**

How long, I wonder, did Jesus spend healing that day? Did he move from group to group? Did he have the disciples and the others help gather the sick to a central spot? We’re not told, but given the size of the crowds, I imagine it took a big chunk of the day, right up to dinner time. Which brings us to the conversation between the disciples and Jesus. Now, remember, it’s been a long day for everyone – Jesus, the crowds, and the disciples – why, they’ve been at it all day, observing and helping out where they could. Healing is done. It’s time to stop now, time to rest. Time for folks to leave this deserted place, to trace their steps back to the towns they came from, or at least to one nearby where they might find a meal. There’s nothing more for them here – surely they’re capable of providing for themselves. On the surface, what the disciples propose probably seems reasonable and practical to us, not so out of line, right? After all, who among us hasn’t had a guest who overstayed their visit? But listen to what the disciples *don’t* say: “Wow, Jesus – look at all the people you’ve healed today!” or “Hey, Jesus, what a long day – how are *you* holding up?” Dale Bruner points out that the disciples are quite abrupt with Jesus, possibly upset that he is so absorbed with the supernatural needs of others that he doesn’t notice their natural ones. They don’t even bother to speak to him with the usual polite address of “Lord” or “Master” – in other words, these guys are *hangry!*

Jesus counters their plan with his own: “They do not need to go away. ***You*** give them something to eat.” He is calling them out – and he’s letting them know that there *is* something here for the people, *we* are here, *you* feed them. Notice that Jesus tells the disciples to feed the people *before* they even tell him what provisions they have. These guys, however, are *really hangry,* so there might be a little bit of attitude in their reply: “We have here *only* five loaves of bread and two fish!” They must be thinking, “This little bit, barely enough for our small group, might as well be nothing.” But when brought to Jesus, a little bit becomes enough, and more. Jesus said, “Bring them here to me.” The compassion Jesus had for the crowds he has for the disciples, too, and he will use this opportunity to include and enable them in his work of grace and mercy and service.

**The Miracle of the Feeding vv.19-20**

Bread and fish were basic Galilean rations, but as the meal unfolds, there are several indications that this is more than a normal snack to satisfy physical hunger. First, Jesus directs the people to sit down on the grass. In the Greek the command to sit down is literally to recline, a position usually taken at a formal banquet. Eating together is a symbol of unity, and instead of being dismissed, as the disciples suggested, the crowds are gathered in community, to share a banquet-style family meal, with Jesus in the role of ‘head of the family’. Next comes the blessing, the normal giving of thanks before a meal, also the responsibility of the head of the family. Looking up to heaven, Jesus **takes** the five loaves and two fish and gives thanks with the table blessing which every Jewish family used: “Blessed are you, Jehovah our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” The prayer doesn’t bless the food – it **blesses** God for the food, acknowledging him as the source of the meal. Then Jesus **breaks** the loaves and **gives** them to the disciples. In these words and actions – takes, blesses, breaks, gives – we hear echoes of the Lord’s Supper.

When the meal goes from Jesus to the disciples to the people, and they are all fed, we learn that a miracle occurred. But the miracle itself is never quite pinpointed; we’re not told how it happened. When and how did the meal get supersized? Was it when Jesus handed it to the disciples, or as the disciples distributed it to the people? While there is no explanation given for the five loaves and two fish feeding so many, with leftovers to boot, this miracle is important enough to be the only one found in all four gospels.

**The Statistical Postlude v. 21**

Our text concludes with a statistical attendance report. Modern commentators acknowledge some embarrassment at the text counting men, but not women and children. Bruner points out that Jesus demonstrated that women and children do count – after all, he *fed* them.

**Meaning for today:**

As the loaves and fish go from the hands of the disciples, to Jesus, back to the disciples, and then to the people, we see that Jesus worked through the hands of his disciples that day. What lessons might they have learned in the process? Are any of the teachings of Jesus that they’ve been hearing these past months beginning to click? One of the sources I read this week writes: “I wonder if it could be that it was in the act of the disciples being willing to put their own concerns aside and to simply give the food they had to the crowds that the miracle occurred? We still don’t know that for sure, but it does seem significant that the disciples who wanted to send everybody away turned around and served their food to the hungry crowds around them. And it would seem that the miracle happened somehow in giving. By setting aside their own concerns, their fears and their doubts, the disciples became channels for God’s miraculous work.” Maybe one of the lessons starting to click for them is when Jesus sent them out on a mission saying, “Freely you have received, freely give.” (Mt. 10:8)

And Jesus still works through his disciples and his church today. There is a sense that this story sums up discipleship, that it’s an invitation to action and involvement, that discipleship is not just about following but participating. In closing, I share the thoughts of another source, Alyce McKenzie: “So it would seem that, as we stand in the shoes of the disciples in Matthew’s account, we are to obey Jesus’ daring, ridiculous command. We are to offer our limited resources to him to bless and multiply, and take responsibility, not to hoard them for ourselves, but to distribute them to others. Resources could be money and possessions, but they also include time, energy, innate abilities, and acquired skills.

Over and over again in life, we stand in the shoes of the disciples in this passage: surrounded by human need, faced with a challenge, knowing we do not have the resources, in our own wisdom, wealth, and strength, to meet the need, to stand up to the challenge. With the disciples, we say, ‘This is a deserted place.’ We sometimes feel our only option is to sit in our La-Z-boy and try not to see the needs, to ignore the challenge. What other choice do we have? Because we do not have what it takes to meet them. Jesus’ words, ‘You give them something to eat,’ are a daily dare. He’s saying, ‘I dare you to take me at my word. And see what happens.’ It’s not easy to take Jesus’ dare to heart and offer our resources, limited as they are, for him to bless, to break and to distribute. Yet that is what this story, told five times in four gospels, reminds us we must and can do. Starting now.”