

## **“Compassionate Abundance” – July 29 – August 2, 2020 – Matthew 14:13-21**

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This story of the Feeding of the 5000 men, plus women and children is very familiar to most followers of Christ. Some of us know it as the story of the Loaves and Fishes. It's such an important story, that it's one of the few that can be found in some form in all four gospel accounts of Jesus. A problem we run into with familiar stories, is that we think we know what they're all about, so much so, that we miss out on all the subtle little details that make it such a rich story. Or, we have a general idea about what it might mean, but we're really not completely sure. Or, we see it as a magical miracle story that happened a really long time ago, but nothing like that could happen now, so it really has little relevance for us today. So, I'd like us to take a closer at it, to see what it might have to say to us in these times.

Right before this event takes place in the ministry of Jesus, he had just learned about the brutal murder of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod. I imagine, this came as quite a blow to Jesus especially at a time right after he had experienced rejection in his hometown of Nazareth.

With this news, Jesus decided he needed some time alone, so he took a boat out and went to a deserted place. This is something Jesus regularly did – making time for prayer and spiritual restoration. The crowds, however, had been growing increasingly more interested in Jesus, so when they saw him leave, they followed him on foot from their communities. When he landed the boat and got out, he quickly put aside his plans for sabbath renewal. Why? As he looked at the crowds of people, he saw their great need, and he had compassion for them. He went out among them and began curing those who were sick. Later on, when it was evening, his disciples came to find him.

As it was a deserted place, the disciples recognized the precarious situation they were all in. It was getting late, the people would be getting hungry, there were huge amounts of people, and the disciples knew they didn't have enough supplies on hand to take care of everyone. They told Jesus to encourage the crowds to move from the wilderness and head back into the nearby cities so they could purchase supplies and take care of their needs. And Jesus told them no. "You feed them." They exclaimed there was no way, they had nothing with which to feed so many people. They actually did have something – five loaves of bread and two fish – but seeing their meager resources, the task seemed impossible. Jesus took the small amount of food, looked up to heaven, prayed a blessing over it, then told his disciple to share it with the crowds. And they did...with many leftovers.

So this story begins with an image of vicious cruelty against a beloved leader known for advocating personal repentance and change. His murder at the hands of a pawn of the state sent a chilling message to those who might try to speak against the authority of the state. Jesus, weary from his ongoing ministry efforts and travel across the countryside, sets aside some time away, yet even as he is leaving, the crowds follows. He arrives in a location away from civilization, in a deserted area, the wilderness – known to the people of Israel as a place of

wandering, testing, hunger and desolation. Their need is so strong, they follow Jesus into this place, longing for healing, longing for God's mercy and love. As he looks at them, Jesus feels great compassion and he does not turn away from their great need.

As day begins to turn into night, his disciples find Jesus. He listens to but ignores their very real concerns. A hungry crowd can quickly turn into something different. Desperate people are capable of desperate actions. And, on the other side, for those who are helpers, it doesn't take much for compassion to become compassion fatigue. The need is too great, and our resources are too few. Send them away. We've done all that we can. What more can they expect from us?

And then there is Jesus, with his overflowing compassion, taking the meager supply of food, asking God to bless it, and it turning into a bounty. The disciples took the food and began distributing it to the people, and all were fed with plenty to spare. The empty and desolate wilderness setting begins to overflow, feeding all who were hungry, it is reminiscent of a scene from Israel's history – paralleling the manna from heaven that was able to daily feed the Israelites as they wandered in the desert with Moses under God's providential guidance.

This story of loaves and fishes is not so much a story about miracles, something from nothing, but a lesson about God's ability to provide for us. This world that has been given to us is full of resources. There is more than enough for all. But just like the disciples of Jesus, we all tend to focus on the scarcity that we see rather than look around for the abundance that God has provided.

And in truth, there are some who have taken possession of much of the world's resources. These same people have a tendency to use their power over these resources to control others, promoting a narrative of scarcity that elicits fear, especially from those whose need is already so great. Jesus tells his disciples to share what we have been given with those who have come to us and have need.

We have the power and the voice to advocate for change in unfair systems, while at the same time, we can provide basic services to fulfill the needs of others. Our food ministries are a great example of just that. But it doesn't really address the bigger issues.

There are systems in place in our society that are broken, and they need to be fixed. Food insecurity is just one area in need of overhaul. Health care is another. If we buy into the narrative of scarcity, we see those in need as being drains on whatever meager supply we have on hand. But if we truly believe in God's ability to provide, we can find ways of tapping into that abundance, advocating for the sharing of resources, and making sure that all God's people have a fair share of the bounty that God has given to all of us.

When Jesus saw the crowd in need, he went into it with compassion. He calls his disciples to the same. Friends, there is much work to be done.