

August 6, 2017
Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus withdrew from the crowds in search of a little space. He wanted some peace and quiet away from people. He needed time to reflect on what had happened. Like a few of our own church members, Jesus went out on the water to get away from everybody and everything. The crowds knew where he was headed, however, and they followed him around the lake. When Jesus got to the other side, there was everybody. “A great crowd.” At least 5000 men, plus women and children, Matthew estimated. Instead of turning around and getting back in his boat, or sending them all away, Jesus had compassion on them. And he got to work. Some were sick and came to him for help, so he healed them.

He had compassion on them. He made them well.

By the time those that needed healing had been made well, the day was late. People were out in the countryside, away from towns and supplies. They needed to eat and sleep, but there was nothing nearby. The disciples noticed the problem, but they didn’t think about how they might help this “great crowd”. Or maybe they weren’t interested in helping. Maybe the need was too great. So they told Jesus, “send them away.” To which Jesus replied, “No. Feed them.” He didn’t want them to leave. He wanted them to stay. There was still work to be done for them.

Jesus had compassion on them. He made them well.

He had compassion on them. He let them stay.

When Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd, they responded with the same confusion that they often did to his crazy ideas. They couldn’t fathom how they might feed the crowd. The disciples just told Jesus what they had. “We have nothing here but 5 loaves and 2 fish.” They described their own supper. Not nearly enough to share, even if they wanted to. Jesus said, “feed

them,” and they essentially responded, “with what?” To which an exasperated Jesus must have sighed a tired sigh. He replied, “Give the food to me.”

He had compassion on them. He made them well.

He had compassion on them. He let them stay.

He had compassion on them. He fed them.

And then they saw God’s abundance.

After Jesus received the food, he looked to heaven and blessed the meal. The disciples had only seen their meager rations. They didn’t dream of anything more than what their eyes saw and their hands held. They didn’t realize that a miracle was tucked into the bread crumbs and fish scales. Where they saw only scarcity, God provided abundance. Jesus gave to the disciples. The disciples gave to the crowd. And everyone ate until they were full. So full that there were baskets of leftovers. More leftovers than there had been at the start of the meal.

Jesus had compassion on them. He made them well. He let them stay. He fed them. Then they saw God’s abundance.

The act of feeding was also a display of abundance. As the crowd’s immediate needs were met by eating calories that would sustain their bodies, they also witnessed God’s abundance. Neither the crowd nor the disciples expected it. No one asked for this impressive miracle. They were living in a mindset of scarcity; everyone was looking out for themselves, assuming that they would have to feed themselves if they were hungry. So the disciples didn’t associate their own supper with an option for feeding the crowd. And the crowd didn’t ask or expect Jesus to feed them. How could he possibly feed a “great crowd” in the middle of nowhere with no preparation? Jesus then made 2 miracles manifest in this feeding. In the first, he brought

forth an unending feast from a few crumbs and fish. In the second, he pushed scarcity from their minds, and replaced it with the possibility of abundance.

Jesus had compassion on them. He made them well. He let them stay. He fed them, and they saw God's abundance.

This wasn't the only time God did such things in scripture. From the first moments of creation, God made us well. He provided a place for Adam & Eve and let them stay. He fed them. And gave them abundance. In the Israelites' journey to the promised land, God made them well (after generations of slavery). He gave them a place that was all their own and let them stay. He fed them – with manna in the wilderness. And did so in abundance. Jesus later did this again in his death and resurrection. In dying for the world, he made us well. He let us stay. He fed us – in body and soul. And gave us abundance.

The world perpetuates a myth of scarcity. We have all come to believe that there isn't enough. Politicians and nations illustrate this when they grab for more power and more land and more military. Businesses illustrate this when they grab for more profit. Even we have come to believe that we don't have enough. In a former congregation, a group met weekly to discuss faith and real life (like our Dinners at the Diner). One week we happened into a discussion of faith and money. I asked folks if they had *enough* in their savings account, to which everyone responded, "no." I then asked how much more they needed. And folks got quiet, then they started justifying why they needed more – property taxes might increase, a major medical event might happen, they might need more for retirement, they might live longer and need assistance. Regardless of how much anyone had (and regardless that simply having a savings account was a sign of wealth), no one thought they had *enough*. And they, accordingly, withheld spending and sharing with others because they needed *more* for themselves. But that's not the Gospel.

The idea that we don't have enough – that is a myth. A myth of scarcity. The truth of our lives is found in God's abundance. Through God's grace, there is more than enough. But this abundance may not be obvious to us. Like the disciples, we may see only meager rations. Like the disciples, we may be looking out for ourselves (not thinking of our neighbors). Like the crowd, we may not ask for help. Instead, when we allow Christ to be present and active in all our wants and needs – even our basic necessities – we find abundance in the place of scarcity.

Jesus has compassion on us. He makes us well. He lets us stay. He provides a place for us. He feeds us. Then we see God's abundance.

Gathering around the Table for Communion is not always a somber occasion. It is also a joyful act when we may be bold enough to actually expect God's abundance. Like the crowds, we are drawn to Jesus' presence. Like the disciples, we are not perfect. We need help and healing. We are hungry. And somehow, in just a bite of bread and sip of wine, we find ourselves sitting down for a meal – even a feast! This is a place where Christ breaks bread, blesses it, and gives us abundant life.

The communion table at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church (in North Carolina) has an unusual inscription. Instead of the usual "Do this in remembrance of me," their table says, "Has everyone been fed?" It's a quote from a sermon by Fred Craddock, when he told the story of an old preacher who asked at the end of a communion service, "Has everyone been fed?" At first the elders think he's just trying to make sure they didn't miss anyone, and so they nod, yes, everyone has been fed. But the preacher doesn't seem satisfied. He asks again, "Has everyone been fed?" And there is an uncomfortable silence. Maybe the old preacher is confused. Maybe he's forgotten where they are. As they wait in an uncomfortable silence, they hear cars passing by outside the church, children playing, and an ambulance siren in the distance. They remember

others who are not with them in the sanctuary. And then they think about the preacher's questions again: "Has everyone been fed?"

Christians cannot share this meal without considering the many others around the world who need to be fed. Literally. In body. Christians cannot share this meal without considering the many others who need to be fed spiritually. And while we may see ourselves as the "little church with the big heart," we have more to give. When we work with Christ and through Christ, we have more to give. More to give than we see. We do not live with scarcity, but live with abundance. For Jesus has compassion on us. He makes us well. He lets us stay. He provides a place for us. He feeds us. Then we see God's abundance.

Thanks be to God.