

Responding With Compassion

The Feeding of the 5000

Matthew 14:13-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The miracle story known as "The Feeding of the Five Thousand", which I suspect you have heard about 5000 times, provides the biblical backdrop for this sermon. This is one of those stories that even people who are not active in organized religion are probably somewhat familiar. We know how important it was to the early church because it is the *only* miracle story that appears in all four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each gospel writer tells the story a bit differently, adding or subtracting details to fit his own particular theological perspective and purpose. I have chosen Matthew's version of the story, primarily because of his emphasis on *our* role in participating with God in acts of compassion.

Let me state right from the start, however, that most progressives like myself believe **the most important question to ask of this story (or any miracle story) is not whether or not it is historically true.** Questioning whether this miracle literally happened the way it is recorded in scripture is an age-old argument that will never be satisfactorily answered for everyone. Speaking personally, I would answer the question about miracle stories in the Bible much as Marcus Borg or Bishop John Shelby Spong would: **Yes, the story bears witness, points to, and reveals truths; but no, it did not necessarily happen in any literal way.**

This is where many people get bogged down. Ever since the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, we in the western world have been taught to believe that truth is inextricably linked to historical accuracy. In other words, **most people would label something as 'true' only if it could be proved and considered to have actually happened in a literal way, as if it could have been recorded on video.** But we are increasingly being taught to ponder the question: What is truth? Modern biblical interpretation methods have helped us to focus more on the truths that are *revealed* in a biblical story rather than on *needing* it to have happened in any sort of literal way in order to make it meaningful. That is also why we don't just dismiss the miracle stories, for they all have something important to share. **This approach makes the language used in scriptures, in many instances at least, metaphorical in nature rather than literal. And this was done intentionally on the part of the gospel writers.** Therefore, a story can be "true" in either case. So perhaps the more important questions to ask of this or any other biblical story are these:

- What does the story reveal about the nature and character of God?
- What does it reveal about ourselves and human nature?
- What does it reveal about our relationship with God?
- What does it reveal about our relationship with each other?

Included in those questions are discovering the **ethical implications and expectations** of us as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus, individually and as the Church?

So, what does this story of the Feeding of the 5000 tell us about God? When Jesus went ashore, saw the great crowd, and had compassion for them, we learn the nature and character of God is one of compassion and concern for all, including our well-being, your-wellbeing. That's a very different picture when compared to those who imagine God as an old gray-bearded man sitting on a far away throne acting as a stern judge ready to zap people when they step out of line.

It's also very important to note that **Jesus had more than just a simple feeling or emotion of compassion for the crowd**. While feelings of compassion are crucial, and very motivational, Jesus went one step further. **Jesus put his compassion into action by actually ministering to the needs of the crowd. Compassion, in the biblical sense, is a desire and the effort to actually help alleviate the suffering of others.** And not only our spiritual and emotional well-being, but also for our physical well-being, as the actual feeding of the crowd attests.

The next question is: What does this story have to say about us as followers of Jesus? Well, it has many things to say. For one, just as Jesus' compassion was the motivation for his ministry, so it was for his disciples, and so it is for us. In fact, the third bullet point of our College Hill Mission Statement reads: "Reaching out with a *compassionate* voice for peace and justice." Following Jesus' lead, the disciples become concerned about the lateness of the hour and the lack of available food for the large crowd of people. We learn what many of us already know and experience, that **compassion for others can be contagious!**

The disciples' *solution* to the problem, however, is much different than Jesus'. The disciples think it best to send the crowd away, so that everyone can go to nearby towns and eat, thereby taking care of their own needs. That's a very rational and reasonable solution. But to their surprise, **Jesus tells them, "you give them something to eat"** (v.16). I'll return to this statement in a moment, because I believe it lies at the very heart of Matthew's story. The disciples predictably respond with, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." With limited resources in the midst of a crisis, the disciples would rather send the needy crowd away to seek help on their own. So, here's something important for us to reflect upon: **Is it possible that the disciples represent our own desire, at least from time to time, to "send away" others so that they can find help on their own? Are we not, like the disciples, often tempted to believe that our resources (individually, or as a congregation) don't amount to much of anything either – so why bother, especially with so many people in need all around us?**

I must admit that I continue to struggle to some extent with what to do for folks who knock on the church door for help. I often listen with a guarded ear that tries to discern whether I'm being scammed or lied to in order to get a handout. Yet, when I meet someone at the door, and at times even on the street, I also hear in my head Jesus' emphatic statement from this miracle story, "YOU give them something..." I am reminded that for Jesus, compassion is accompanied with action.

When the disciples respond with "We have nothing here – nothing – nothing but five loaves and two fish" **they are focused not on what they have, but on what they don't have. They see only problems, not possibilities.** From a practical standpoint, this biblical story encourages us to get beyond the attitude that says, "We have nothing, except for this very little." For this story reveals that **God uses even the very little we have**

to offer to minister in powerful ways to others. Over the years, I have learned from folks involved in ministries of peace and justice to focus more on what's called a **theology of abundance**, than on a theology of scarcity, which still dominates our culture.

When we focus on scarcity, our anxiety level rises – like when we reflect upon how much less money we have at the end of each month after paying our ever-increasing bills, especially recently as inflations has kicked in again. Here's where our scripture reading can offer us some guidance. In today's biblical text the disciples express their anxiety and concern for the needs of the crowd. They bring those needs and concerns to Jesus. We, too, in our concern for others and ourselves, can bring those things to God. Yes, **the Sacred Presence in our midst is already aware of our needs and concerns, but there is still something transformative when we share that in the context of our relationship with God.** Yet, like Jesus' response to the disciples, sometimes God answers our prayers with: You do something about it, even with God's Presence with and within us.

Perhaps God is saying to us: I've provided you with food, distribute some of it to others. I've provided you with finances, donate some to those in need. I've provided you with time and abilities, volunteer them to the good of the church, family, and the community. **God will use and bless what we bring, even if it's only five loaves and two fish. That's because God is in the abundance business, not scarcity.**

Therefore, **let us emphasize and focus on what we *have*, not on what we *don't have*.** Let us see possibilities and opportunities, not just problems and seemingly overwhelming challenges. And like the disciples who were motivated by their compassion and instructed to take action themselves, let us respond in a like manner with each other, and especially with those in need.

Amen.