

A Call to Compassion: “You give them something...” The Feeding of the 5000

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

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We've talked a lot about compassion this summer, and will continue to do so today. You've heard me refer to the John Pavlovitz seminar I attended during my sabbatical, "Cultivating Hope in Difficult Times: Avoiding Compassion Fatigue." Several adult church school classes, including one this morning, have focused on the material John used to lead that workshop. We acknowledged **there is a price to pay, especially emotionally, for being compassionate and concerned for the well-being of others, and for the state of the world. Sometimes it hurts to care so much, especially for loved ones.**

You've also heard about our Vacation Church School's curriculum, "Compassion Camp." From my sermon a month ago, I stated, "In and through God's love and compassion for all life, we are to develop and grow in our own compassion. And what is compassion? This is how the Compassion Camp curriculum defines it, which is basically empathy put into action.

- I see your hurt.
- I feel your hurt.
- I help ease your hurt.

An understanding of our call to compassion, literally defined as "to suffer with", is demonstrated in today's Gospel Reading from Matthew 14, his version of what is commonly known as the Feeding of the 5000. As an aside, you may have noticed that in this miracle story, Matthew adds, "And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children." That would conservatively put the total number of those fed from around 15,000-20,000 people. Picture a sold-out BOK Center of hungry people.

Some biblical literalists, therefore, believe there must have been two miraculous feedings because other gospel versions only mention 5000 people total. Modern biblical scholars, however, simply conclude that each gospel writer tells the same story a bit differently, adding or subtracting details to fit his own particular theological perspective and purpose.

And I will reiterate something you've heard me say about 5000 times. **Biblical progressives believe the most important question to ask of this story (or any miracle story) is *not* whether it happened in a literal historical sense. Instead of equating truth as proof involving verifiable facts, a focus of Western Civilization since the time of the Enlightenment, miracle stories in the Bible can be approached in a different way. For yes, miracle stories do bear witness to, point to, and reveal important truths; but no, they**

did not necessarily happen in any literal way. This reveals that truths can be revealed through metaphorical language, as well. Is that not a primary purpose underlying most children's books?

That being said, Matthew's version of the story is perhaps my favorite, primarily because of his emphasis on **our role in participating with God in acts of compassion.** In any biblical story concerning Jesus, it is important to search out the ethical implications and expectations of *us* as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer would call it, the cost of discipleship.

When Jesus went ashore and saw the great crowd, his immediate reaction was to have compassion for them. From this, we learn the nature and character of God, the Sacred Presence that is beyond, among, and within us and all of creation, is one of compassion and concern for all. That includes your well-being, and our well-being. That's a very different understanding 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 condemn and punish people when they step out of line.

It's also very important to note that Jesus had more than just a simple *feeling* of compassion for the crowd. It went beyond the emotion of sympathy, or even pity. For Jesus, and for us, **feelings and emotions of compassion are just the starting point. They should then act as motivation to take the next step. Jesus put his compassion into action by actually ministering to the needs of the crowd. Compassion, in the biblical sense, is a desire and effort to actually help ease and alleviate the suffering of others.** And as revealed in this story, not only our spiritual and emotional well-being, but also for our physical well-being, as the actual feeding of the crowd attests, alleviating their hunger.

What, then, does this story have to say about us as followers of Jesus? For one, **just as Jesus' compassion was the motivation for his ministry, so it was for his disciples, and so it must be 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." That involves taking action. We learn what many of us already know and experience, that compassion for others can be contagious!

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. 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, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat" (v.16).

The disciples predictably respond out of a perspective of scarcity, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 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, thus removing ourselves from the equation? Like the disciples, are we not often tempted to believe that our meager 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. Though sometimes skeptical, 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. Therefore, I most often err on the side of grace and generosity.

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 move 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.**

When we focus on scarcity, our anxiety level rises. Yet, 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, talents, and abilities, volunteer them to the good of the community, church, and family. That's how some interpret this biblical story, **the miracle of people sharing with each other what they have.**

God will bless and use what you bring, 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 Jesus' compassion, and instructed to take action themselves, let us respond in a like manner with each other, and especially with those in need. Think of the difference that would make in our own communities and beyond.

Hear and live out Jesus' words, “You give them something...” That's our call to compassion.

Amen.