Matthew 14:13-21

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.14When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.15When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’16Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; **you** give them something to eat.’17They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’18And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’19Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.20And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.21And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

*A Miracle’s Main Ingredient*

The first question we need to ask ourselves is, “What is ‘this’?” What was the news that made Jesus withdraw into a deserted place, that made him want to be alone? The answer is the news of his cousin’s grisly death. John the Baptist, who had been under house arrest by King Herod, mainly due to his criticism John had levied against Herod due to his marriage with his brother’s ex-wife Herodias. During Herod’s birthday party, his daughter Salome danced so well for his guests that Herod made an oath to give her whatever she wanted. After consulting with her mother, she requested the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Not only is this a gruesome murder, but it’s committed by the king who would never be brought to trial for his injustice. For Jesus, he had lost a family member, the man who had baptized him. This crime also would have reminded Jesus of the danger he also faced as his message and actions would also be considered a threat to those in power.

But Jesus’ service is in such high demand that he cannot have time alone today; by the time reaches the shore, he sees the crowd that has followed him. And what a crowd it is. For Jesus’ day, a crowd of five thousand men, not including women and children, would have been more than the population of a small city – no wonder the priests were afraid of Jesus; had he wanted, he could have easily mustered a substantial army. But today the people are not here to fight for Jesus; they’re here for healing. And so Jesus does exactly what we would expect Jesus to do: he has compassion for them and he cures those who are sick. No mental health day for Jesus; just work among the crowds.

It may have been out of consideration for Jesus that his disciples, as evening set in, suggested that Jesus call it a day. He had put in a long day, and had not even had time to mourn the loss of John.

But this is a teaching moment for Jesus - a time to give his disciples a lesson on providence and responsibility. Yes, it had been a long day; Jesus and the disciples were both likely to be hungry as well. But Jesus saw something that the disciples did not yet see. Perhaps he saw that some in the crowd were not going to have dinner tonight. Perhaps he saw that some would go to bed hungry. And whereas the disciples saw that they hardly had enough to take care of their own hungry bellies, Jesus saw God the Father’s infinite resources, and knew that there were people who needed what God could provide.

Jesus saw more than that. A man who could calm the storms and cast out demons and heal the blind and the lame could have just waved his hands and made all that hunger go away. He could have made a tablecloth and bucket of fried chicken appear in front of every family that came. But Jesus knew that *his time in this world was limited,* and if his ministry was to continue, if the Kingdom of God was going to grow and blossom in this wonderful world, his disciples would need to learn to trust in that providence and to act upon it. And so Jesus tells them, “You don’t need to send them away. *You* give them something to eat.”

This is where so many of us struggle, and consequently our churches struggle. We meticulously take inventory of our resources and are cautious not to over-spend, because we need to meet budget, and careless spending will threaten the continuation of our ministry. We calculate our charity based upon the resources we see in front of us, feeding who we can, contributing what we can, making a difference wherever we can. And we tell ourselves, “We do what we can.” I imagine that if you or I were one of the twelve disciples, and we had looked at the crowd and the five measly loaves and the two fish that we had, we might have started to divide the crowd and then target those who had no food at home and no money to buy food, and then I dare say we would have still ended up short on resources. We might have done a lottery to choose maybe a dozen people who would be adequately nourished on five loaves and two fish. We might have decided to open a food pantry and distribute our loaves and fish on a first-come-first-serve basis. But in the back of our minds we would be telling ourselves that there is no way we can possibly take care of the needs of all these people. Not enough food for so many. But Jesus’ instructions continue to haunt us; “You give them something.”

It’s a frustrating command because we see ourselves as limited. But what limits us mostly is not our perception that there are not enough resources to handle the situation. What really limits us is our own inability to love our neighbor. How many of us, if we saw our own children starving, would not freely offer up our own food to them? How many of us, if our brother or sister had no food, would not feed them? When Jesus first looked upon this crowd of sick, desperate people following him into the wilderness, Matthew says, “He felt compassion for them” and cured their sick. It was Jesus’ compassion for this crowd that made him see them not simply as hungry human beings but indeed as *family!* In Jesus’ day, people followed certain eating customs that have become quite foreign to us. People actually ate together with family and perhaps some close friends, not like today when we eat by ourselves, or go to Applebees, where we decide at the last minute what we’ll eat and who we’ll be eating with. Jews were very particular about the company they kept at meals and how food was prepared. So when Jesus invites this crowd to sit down for a meal in the wilderness, he is doing more than offering to feed them; he is saying something about the relationship he has with them. And their acceptance of his invitation is confirming their status as family and friends…all of them! Over the last two Sunday’s we’ve heard Jesus tell us that we are not capable of judging the wheat from the weeds, and that what some may consider to be a shrub may indeed be a servant of God. Here before the disciples are five thousand men plus women and children, people they know very little about, who their master has just invited to dinner and have apparently accepted his invitation. The real challenge for the disciples is this: Can they look at these people and love every one of them enough to forfeit their own meal? That’s our challenge as well. Is our love, our compassion, adequate to lead us to sacrifice, and the honest answer is “no.”

I’ve been on one foreign mission trip in my life, and it forever changed my life. Our mission team worked week after week, raising money and preparing skits and music for our trip to the Dominican Republic. We dealt with heat and mosquitoes and other discomforts in order to serve the poorest of the poor, and among our discoveries was the generosity of those who have so little. Everyone was humbled and excited to do it all over again. I pray that soon Bethel will have an established mission team that can go on a short-term mission, so that you too will be blessed by such an experience, to know what it’s like to be welcomed by those who don’t even know us, don’t even speak our language, so that we too can learn to welcome strangers and practice what we call “radical hospitality.”

Today, I wanted us to share in the Lord’s Supper, to be reminded of Jesus’ radical hospitality, the kind of hospitality that would invite five thousand men, not including the women and children, to stick around for supper. What’s in the fridge? It doesn’t matter, because God will provide. What matters is that we’re all together at one table, that Christ is the host, and that none are ever turned away. What matters is that our Lord would offer up his last piece of bread (his body?) for any one of us. Could we do the same for Jesus? For others?