

## **“To the Crowds Given”**

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



*Matthew 14:13-21*

*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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When 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.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 was so important to the early church that it is told in all four Gospels. It’s a rich, multi-layered story that can be heard on several levels, all important—emotional, political, sacramental. It’s all here in a passage deserving a life-time of study and prayerful reflection.

To unpack it a bit this morning, we have to start back before the story Jamie read for us, because the first verses she read said: “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him from the towns.” What had they just heard that prompted these stark responses?

Well, let me tell you—the first 12 verses of Chapter 14 are not for the squeamish. Not a part of the story that we often hear in church. The ruler Herod, remember him?, was evidently hosting a sumptuous banquet on his birthday, rich food and drink far exceeding the needs of his guests. Herod himself appears to have lost his senses. Besotted and enamored of a beautiful dancing girl, he grants her one wish—the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Now Herod had not even wanted to arrest John the Baptist because John was beloved by the people as a prophet. On account of this, Herod feared the crowds. Yet, in the frenzy of revelry and drink, he orders John beheaded in prison. The disciples buried him and went and told Jesus.

THIS is what Jesus had just heard when our story opens this morning. Overcome by what we would now call another “senseless act of violence,” stunned by the arbitrary cruel power of Herod, grieving deeply the death of his cousin, Jesus withdraws to a wilderness place, a place like the desert of his Temptation, a place apart, outside the tyrannical network of Roman power that choked the life out of the cities and towns.

This is the news the crowds heard as well. And they left the towns, too, moving out past the reach of the authorities to be in the presence of Jesus. In their time of grief and dismay they sought a refuge, a place apart, in the company of one they had come to know and trust. Jesus of Nazareth. And unlike Herod who feared those crowds, Jesus had compassion upon them and healed their crushed hearts and spirits.

When the evening came, it was time to eat. “Send them away,” the disciples said to Jesus. “Send them back to those towns to get some food for themselves,” they urged him. Send them back to the very people that oppress them where they can work or beg for food. That’s how things worked in those days.

Jesus refuses to do so. “They need not go away,” he said. “Give them something to eat, here, now, in this place apart.” Jesus was again showing them what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. In God’s house there is food enough for all, manna from heaven. In God’s house there is safety and justice and compassion. Jesus wants his disciples, he wants us, to understand.

Do you see the contrast between the Rule of Herod and the Kingdom of God? The contrast between tyranny, violence, oppression, excess for the privileged few, the economy of scarcity—and the beloved community, the peaceable kingdom, the place where God provides for all, regardless of status, rank, gender, age, the economy of abundance? Those who ate that evening were about 5,000 men, plus all the women and children.

Herod feared those crowds. Jesus had compassion upon them. And sustenance--physical, spiritual, emotional--was unto the crowds given.

So, what does this mean for us? Surely we’re not as awful as Herod. But how can it be that we live in a time of extreme hunger crisis in much of the world—20 million people in Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen—20 million people at risk of starving to death. A recent poll showed that 85% of Americans aren’t even aware that this is going on. Do we fear the crowds? Do we have compassion on the crowds? Or might we be found guilty

of what John Wesley called “voluntary ignorance?” Shielding ourselves from such devastating news, choosing not to know, not to respond.

I think that still, when Jesus hears something like this news of senseless suffering, he withdraws to a place apart to grieve and to pray, to seek the face and voice and presence of God. I think he invites us to go there with him, to open our hearts, again, to remember that our God is a God of compassion. And he challenges us not to turn the crowds away, but to give them something to eat.

We have ways to do that through the outreach ministries of the United Methodist Church. We just need to raise our voices and step up our giving and insist that no one be forgotten or overlooked or sent away empty.

Jesus has compassion on us, too. He knows we will be tempted to forget, to lose sight of the abundant potential and promise that God wants to see manifest on earth as it is in heaven. And so he gave us the sacrament of Holy Communion, to remind us, to ground us, to call us back to the truth of who we are and who God has created us to be with and for one another. Did you hear it in the words of today’s story? “Taking the five loaves and 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.” There it is—the heart of our sacrament: take, bless, break, give. Take, bless, break, give.

By this, we are fed. By this, we draw near to God. By this, we become a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. “Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,” we pray.

May it be so. May it be. Amen.

Notes:

Jesselyn Cook. “Most Americans Oblivious to Extreme Hunger Crisis Overseas.” Huff Post. July 13, 2017.

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