

## “An Uncompromising Compassion”

Matthew 14: 13-21

18<sup>th</sup> Sun. in Ordinary Time

July 31, 2011

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### “An Uncompromising Compassion”

It’s hard to miss... the connection to communion.

It’s a not-so-subtle foreshadowing of a meal still to come. A meal Jesus will eventually share with his disciples... as well as with you and with me. .

Let me share it with you again:

*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;*

You and me and readers who come to the gospel from this side of Christ’s last supper—after he’d already shared it that first time—we can see in this story of Jesus feeding the multitudes a foreshadowing of that final meal shared in an upper room.

This use of foreshadowing is, of course, intentional. It’s how the gospel authors signal readers that what’s happening here is important. A story made even more important by the fact that this is the one and only miracle story that all four gospels share. Or in other words, folks... this is a story that screams “Pay attention!” Something imperative, something critical is going on in our gospel lesson today!

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Interestingly enough, though, it’s a lesson that doesn’t begin where our lection picks up this morning, but a bit earlier in the narrative, as Jesus encounters difficult news at the end of a long and difficult journey. You see, after Jesus had taught the disciples and crowds about God’s kingdom through parables—some of which we explored last week—Matthew tells us that Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth. Perhaps looking for the comfort of old friends and familiar surroundings, he entered the town and began teaching. But we learn that the townsfolk didn’t like what they heard—not one bit. So they kicked him out. No pride in one of their own becoming a prophet of God. No compassion for an itinerant preacher in need of a pat on the back and some time to catch up. They kicked him out as quickly as they could—making painfully clear to Jesus that Nazareth didn’t want him anymore.

But that’s not the worst part. As Jesus met back up with his disciples following his hometown ostracism, he learns of another painful loss. John the Baptist has died. Killed at the hands of a tyrannical ruler. The one who had worked so hard to prepare the way for Jesus’ coming... has now paid a brutal price.

And Jesus hurts. He grieves. How could he not? Ostracized by those who used to call him “friend”... shunned from the place he used to call home... lost in a haze of grief stemming from a good prophet’s passing... Jesus needs some time. Some time to himself. Some time,

perhaps, to cry... Some time, perhaps, to pray... Some time to simply sit in silence... to re-center himself upon who and whose he is. So, as Matthew makes clear, Jesus goes to find some time just for himself, getting in a boat and heading off to “a deserted place.”

But time to himself proves impossible to find. As soon as Jesus steps out of his boat, he realizes that the crowds have found him... even there... following him all the way to that deserted place.

He would've had every right in the world to send them away. To shout out, “Not here! Not now! Can't you give me just a moment?! Just one day to myself? Can't you see I'm hurting? Don't you see the streaks on my cheeks? Do you really not understand how tired I am?”

He could have scolded them for their incessant need for more.

He could have turned his back on them in order to tend to himself for once... just for once.<sup>1</sup>

But he doesn't. He does none of these things... hurting and grieving and tired though he is.

Instead, as Jesus looks around and sees the crowd, Matthew says “he had compassion for them.” “He had compassion for them.”

As one of my favorite preachers Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “With every reason in the world to choose anger, resentment, or despair, (Jesus) chooses compassion. He looks at the crowd and through some holy [miracle in and of itself] he sees not a crowd but a collection of people—a woman with a frail baby in her arms, a gaunt man with a withered hand, a [little] boy with a face full of questions about the meaning of his life. He sees all these *people*, like sheep without a shepherd, and he lays aside his own need in favor of theirs.”<sup>2</sup>

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That's what compassion does, of course. It puts one's own needs aside in favor of the needs of others.

And in his compassion, Jesus welcomes the crowds yet again... and he teaches them... and he heals those who are sick and counsels those who are troubled. He gives them all he has to give them—his love and attention... his truth and his grace—until the disciples notice the sun is setting. And amid a deserted place like this, there's certainly no food to be found.

So they approach Jesus to warn him, “The hour is getting late and we're all getting hungry. It's time to send the people away, Jesus.”

It's an honest assessment of a practical concern. But Jesus didn't see it that way.

“They don't need to leave,” he responds. “*You* give them something to eat.”

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It's one of those life-lessons no one actually enjoys learning. Like a teacher refusing to accept less than the very best from her students... like a parent refusing to accept less than fullness for their child... Jesus determines to prove to his disciples that they have the same power of compassion he does.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

“*You* give them something to eat,” he says.

The disciples, of course, are dumbfounded. They only have five loaves and two fish. “What good can we do amid such need?” they reply. “We can’t even begin to feed most of them, let alone all of them. Let one who has more take care of them. Or better yet, let the hungry feed themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

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Such is the temptation in the face of great need, isn’t it? To deny responsibility. To deny our call to do something—anything—about it. After all, “What meaningful thing can we possibly do in the face of five thousand hungry souls,” the disciples wonder.

We act as if it’s a confession of powerlessness... as if we’re just being honest about ourselves. We, individually, and we societally, do it so often, don’t we? And we do it so well that we actually tend to convince ourselves that the lie is true... that we are powerless... that we don’t have anything to offer... that there is nothing we can do in the face of such radical needs around us.

What can little ol’ we do to curb climate change?

What can we do to support the refugees...

What can we do to feed those living amid famine or the horror of plain ol’ food insecurity...

What can we do to fight for things like education and healthcare for both the global and local poor?

We can we do about the inner city violence and homicides ripping through Baltimore?

What can we do?

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Right now, as we sit here, a 72-Hour cease fire is in effect in Baltimore City. Led by community leader Erricka Bridgeford and a group of community activists who have seen and personally experienced the trauma that is Baltimore’s inner city violence, they have hit the streets to personally campaign and communicate with gang members and drug dealers “to put their guns down from Friday through Sunday.

“This is about a culture shift, she said amid a CNN interview. ““It’s about helping people realize they have a choice in their decision-making. Not just about committing violence but about feeling hopeless that there’s nothing we can do about the level of violence in our communities.””<sup>4</sup>

Pessimists say their prospects are dismal. “Violence is surely to erupt somewhere, sometime this weekend.”

But as the Baltimore Police spokesman noted, “The measure of success is that we’re (even) having this conversation.”

Erricka Bridgeford added, “If there is any violence, people are going to immediately rush to those neighborhoods and give people the love and support they need.”

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>4</sup> Ray Sanchez, “Nobody Kill Anybody: Baltimore hopes for homicide-free weekend” <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/04/us/baltimore-ceasefire-weekend/>

The disciples make clear to Jesus, “We only have five loaves and two fish, Jesus! What can we do?”

“Bring them here to me,” he answers.

*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.*

Pay close attention and you’ll notice that while most think of this story as Jesus feeding the multitudes, Jesus doesn’t actually feed a single one of them. Rather, Jesus gives the disciples the food, and the disciples feed the crowds.<sup>5</sup> The very same disciples who only moments ago asked, “What can we do?” take the gifts they have been given, and then turn and share them with thousands. Feeding them in ways they could have never ever imagined before.

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It was the first of two amazingly important, life-changing meals portrayed in the gospels that point us to the profound power of compassion. Compassion that looks at need, no matter how big, no matter how small, and refuses—REFUSES—to turn away.

We may wish it weren’t so. We may wish that Christ’s compassion has room for compromise...

compromise for the times we’re too tired...

compromise for the times we’re in need ourselves...

compromise for the times we frankly don’t like the one who needs our help...

compromise for the moments we’re too scared...

compromise for the issues that seem too big...

compromise for the issues that leave us asking, “What can we do?”

But Christ’s call to compassion leaves no such room for compromise.

He has made it profoundly clear—we are called to care. We are called to offer compassion. Just as he modeled so powerfully in the meal in our story... and in the meal laid out before us all this morning—Jesus equips us with the sacred gift of compassion—and the call to live it out.

So no more, “I’m too tired’s.”

No more looking the other way.

No more, “What can I do’s?”

No more waiting for someone else to do something about it.

As we can see just glimpsing at the missional life within this community... we can tend to the sick. We can feed the hungry. We can clothe the naked. We can bring wholeness to the broken. We can offer peace to the afflicted.

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<sup>5</sup> Dock Hollingsworth in Homiletical Perspective article on Matthew 14: 13-21 in *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3* edited by David . Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 311284.

We can be the body of Christ in the world today... if we refuse to compromise on Jesus' call to compassion.

May it be so. Amen.