

“More than Enough”

“And they all ate and were satisfied” (Matthew 14:20).

A few years ago I went to a conference where a woman named Ruby Payne spoke about understanding poverty. It was a fascinating presentation that opened my eyes to the impact of poverty on a person’s approach to the most basic human experiences. She gave many examples of this but one that really sticks out in my memory is how people from different socio-economic levels think and talk about food. For instance, people who come from wealth are primarily interested in the preparation and presentation of the meal. A person from a middle-class background will be most concerned with how the food tasted. But for someone who is coming from a place of poverty the question that matters most is, “Did you get enough to eat?”

Regardless of socio-economic background, our lives are defined by our needs and the abundance or the scarcity of food is a question that every government, every parent and every person on earth must address. Food is essential to life itself and, in today’s Gospel reading from Matthew, the issue of hunger becomes the stage for one of the greatest miracles recorded in Scripture.

As our text opens we find Jesus in a very human place of need. John the Baptist – the man who had served as the prophetic messenger sent to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God and who pointed to Jesus as the Messiah and who also happened to be a cousin to Jesus – had been beheaded by King Herod and in the verses just prior to today’s reading, Matthew recounts the story of John’s brutal execution. This is the news “Jesus heard” in the introduction to today’s Gospel lesson and His reaction is immediate and it is dramatic. Matthew tells us that Jesus “withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself” (Matthew 14:13).

We can all understand this reaction. The death of someone we love is always disorienting. It can drive us into depression or it can ignite us to anger. Dealing with death can leave us feeling helpless and it can sap us of our energy. The truth is that we all process death in different ways but the *last thing* most people would ever want to do in the wake of such difficult news is face a crowd of needy people. Understanding this background makes the next part of our reading even more remarkable, because here Matthew tells us that following the news about John’s death the crowds flocked to Jesus, but instead of retreating from their needs or lashing out in anger at their intrusion on His grief, Jesus has compassion on them. And without judging them, without screening them, without demanding anything from this massive group of people...He healed them.

Now it’s important for us to understand that, by and large, these people weren’t there because they believed. They weren’t there because they wanted to worship. They weren’t there because they were heeding the preaching of John the Baptist...they were there because they were in need. Some were curious because of what they had heard about Jesus. I’m sure others were there to hear what new teaching Jesus could offer. Clearly many came with physical or emotional problems and were desperate for help. But no one was there to properly honor Jesus as the Lamb of God who would be sacrificed for the sins of the world...and no one was there to acknowledge the Suffering Servant who would bear their griefs and carry their sorrows, who would be wounded for their transgressions and crushed for their iniquities. To these people Jesus was someone who could offer an answer to their immediate needs. And for this tangled and sinful mass of humanity...Jesus has compassion. In the midst of His own grief He gives Himself to them. He answers cruelty with mercy. He meets darkness with light. He responds to unbelief with faith and when He is confronted with death, He responds with life. *Jesus has compassion!* This is in itself a miracle of God and yet after a day in which He has healed the sick and given refuge to the weary; after a day in which He has set aside His own broken heart to deal with a multitude of the brokenhearted, His disciples seem to have completely missed the grace of this miraculous moment. In verse 15 Matthew writes, “Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a desolate place, the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’”

The disciples simply don't seem to care. Undoubtedly dealing with their own hunger, they are nervous about the overwhelming needs of the crowd but instead of asking Jesus what they should do or how He wants them to respond to the needs of the people their response essentially is: "Hey Jesus, we can't deal with this! This is an impossible situation and you need to get these people out of here."

At this point, it's important to understand the context in which this story unfolds. You see, these disciples had just returned from being sent by Jesus to preach the Good News and to heal the sick and to drive out demons and to raise the dead...*and they had done it* (Matthew 10; Mark 6; Luke 9)! Not only had they witnessed the signs and miracles of Jesus but He had given them authority to do the same and they responded to this power and calling of God by demanding that Jesus send the crowds away essentially saying, "There is nothing we can do."

There is an important lesson for us in this response! You see the disciples were distracted by their own hunger and they were anxious about the desperate situation around them, and as they focused on themselves, they had forgotten about Jesus...and so do we! We can completely understand the panic of the disciples and we can totally relate to the exhaustion they must have felt and yet at their lack of compassion and faith Jesus doesn't blink and Jesus doesn't rebuke. Instead, to these anxious, exhausted, doubting disciples Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

To these words of instruction, the disciples seemed even more exasperated and tried to make their point by bringing out the little food they did have; five loaves of bread and two measly fish might make a dinner for twelve but it wouldn't come close to meeting the needs of the crowd. In their minds it was clear that they couldn't feed these people...and in that desperate moment, everything changed. "And (Jesus) said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children" (Matthew 14:18-21).

They pointed to what they lacked, and from their "lack" Jesus provided more than enough. They pointed to what they did not have and from their "nothing" Jesus provided everything the crowd needed...*and He used His disciples to do it!* The grace of God is delivered by these sinful, exhausted, doubting disciples and, my friends, *this is the miracle of the church!!!*

Our Savior has compassion on the needy and our Savior has provided for the poor and our Savior has called us out of our poverty and exhaustion and anxiety and doubt and He has forgiven us of our sins and given us the power to deliver His life-giving, life-changing, life-saving gifts.

The account of this miracle is included in each of the four Gospels and what we need to see in this miraculous story is more than a physical feeding. Jesus created bread and fed the masses not only to stave off their physical hunger for a night. He provided this daily bread in a miraculous way in order to point the crowd and His disciples and us to a larger truth and a greater reality and following this story in John's Gospel, Jesus tells us exactly what this truth is: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger...I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:35, 51).

Just a few days before his death, Martin Luther wrote, "We are all beggars before God." And, spiritually speaking, we all come from a place of poverty; we all come from a place of hunger; we all come from a place of need. And the message of the Gospel that saves us is the promise of God that in Jesus there is always more than enough. Receive and share this Bread of Life. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold