

**SUMMER PICNIC; MATTHEW 14:13-21; AUGUST 6, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY;  
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There's much to be said for context. Matthew places today's lesson just after the death of John the Baptist; the scenes are juxtaposed for maximal impact, sequenced by a master storyteller.

First, the camera scans Herod's birthday party – a bacchanalian orgy – the king's entourage is lost in a gluttonous spree of food and sex; a young woman dances before Herod, she pleases him, he promises her anything in his kingdom; her mother whispers to her 'the head of John the Baptist.' Herod, "was grieved" the text says, as he realizes the diabolical web in which he has been caught. But having given his oath he has the prophet executed.

The camera then shifts to a windswept mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has retreated here to mourn his cousin John's death and perhaps to contemplate his own ministry. He too is caught in the crosshairs of the authorities. Yet, he does not retreat from or avoid the crowds who follow him here, but responds to their pleas for healing. The day spent, Jesus' disciples urge him to send the crowds away so they can find food before nightfall. But Jesus says to the disciples, "there is no need to send them away. You give them something to eat."

Two meals, side by side; the one Herod hosts is self-indulgent and deadly; the other, Jesus hosts, is biblical hospitality – bread for the stranger – offered in the grand "come one, come all" tradition of God's banquets in the New Testament.

We think of this as the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand but it might better be called the miracle of the disciples' generosity. The omission of the small boy who appears in John's Gospel and offers the loaves and fish, focuses our attention, in Matthew, on the disciples' relationship with Jesus; the two fish and five loaves are all they have to offer for the impromptu picnic.

Noteworthy is their concern for the crowd's hunger that leads them to suggest that Jesus send them away. Apparently, Jesus' compassion for the crowds has rubbed off on them. Yet, this moment becomes, in Matthew's account, a snapshot of where much of the church's (and world's) compassion starts and stops – when we see great need or injustice and say, 'isn't that awful; we wish there was something we could do; *someone* ought to do something.'

And *what could* the disciples do? The crowd was large, how could the twelve of them begin to satisfy the hunger of thousands?

Nevertheless, Jesus says, 'you give them something to eat.'

With his instruction, the self-imposed, safe distance between the disciples and the crowd is eliminated and Jesus' followers are brought face to face with fellow human beings in need; what Jesus helps them discover is that their meager resources are more than enough. If the story had ended here with only a few being fed it would have been worthy of recording as an example of how to love our neighbor.

But Matthew tells us *all were fed* and there were leftovers! Just as Jesus shrinks the distance between the disciples and the crowds, let us shrink the distance between us and the story. Two factors prevent us from grasping its power. Like the disciples who feel sorry for the crowds but fail to connect with their need, we often fail to see the relevance of this story for our faith and witness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Why the disconnect? First, hunger for us is different than in Jesus' day. In Jesus' day harvests were not taken for granted; drought could lead to famine. Food was a precious resource – to share it with a stranger was a radical act of hospitality. We merely take more out of the refrigerator.

Physical hunger for us is a slight gnawing in the tummy we quell with a snack; and yet, we don't have to look far to see hungry people; like *New York Times* report last week of the kids who swarm the nearly 200 public libraries in Ohio each summer for federally funded free lunches – they are so intent on getting a meal they bypass the sign-up sheet for computer time and go straight to the lunch tables. The rates of poverty – 1/3 of the children in this city *and nation* who live at or near poverty is a judgment on all of us; yet, I often read such statistics, shake my head, say 'it's a shame' and go about my day unfazed.

Secondly, I fear we sometimes trivialize stories like this by a post-Enlightenment skepticism that discards the account because of the incongruity of five thousand people being fed with two fish and fives loaves of bread. We claim not to be literalists, yet we reject biblical miracles with simplistic, literal interpretations and in doing so close our hearts to the voice of Jesus who speaks to us through the Gospels.

If the point of the story is to demonstrate Jesus' superpowers, performing feats of magic, I'd have to wonder *what's* the point of the story – Jesus showing off his divinity? Such a Jesus evokes the *New Yorker* cartoon of him with a group of superheroes sitting around a campfire and Jesus telling Batman, the Hulk, and Wonder Woman, "and that's *how I* saved the world."

Instead, what we have from Matthew is an account of a moment that not only lifts up Jesus' ministry of compassion and healing but underscores the central role *the disciples play* in enabling Jesus to extend his reach and touch lives. The story is really about the disciples.

If we realize the gut-wrenching hunger descending on the crowd and take the story seriously then we begin to see all kinds of people in need. Hungry kids across the State of Ohio and the nation, mourners of violence on the East Side, those trapped in opioid addiction, nursing homes filled with people at various stages of dementia, the world refugee crisis; immigrants under threat of deportation breaking up families.

And our compassion isn't stymied but empowered, we do not reject our capacity to do something just because the problem is big.

Sometimes it's not just the size of the problem that stops us from doing something – it's our self-absorbed lives, in a culture that sustains itself on consumerism and leads inevitably to despair as the title of a Peter Gomes sermon said, "When Too Much Is Not Enough." The tag line for today's story might be, "When just a little is all we need."

The retail, food, technology and travel industries would have us fill the spiritual void in our lives with lovely things and exotic experiences; yet these ultimately fail to satisfy, *deeply satisfy*, our longing for self-worth and purpose. What the feeding of the five thousand tells us is that we find purpose and self-worth in letting God use us and what we have to serve our neighbors in need.

What does the lesson say specifically to Westminster? I said last week we are at the juncture of an exciting moment; our city is on the rise, yet perhaps not completely clear about who the new Buffalo is or where it is going. A local architect who came back to the region made an interesting observation, he said we get 'historic preservation' – treasures like the Richardson Towers or Darwin Martin House that we've invested in and restored. But we're not so clear about what a new skyline ought to look like or the next tall building.

We might say the same thing about our communities and diversity in the city – the West Side is emerging as a hot real estate market; the East Side has some big interesting projects – but where is it leading? How will the one third of Buffalonians who live at or near poverty fare in the new Buffalo? Will the resurgence include them?

You've heard me say we are actively looking for a mission focus as we anticipate a capital campaign; even though this building is all about mission, making it available for education and outside self help groups, it's time to ask ourselves, as we did with WEDI ten years ago, who are we being called to serve in the wider community.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand prevents us from thinking small like Jesus' disciples when they wanted to send the people away because, they wrongly assumed, there was nothing they could do.

Rather, we look to our immediate future as a church, allowing ourselves to come face to face with those in our community upon whom all kinds of want and need have descended; and but for the grace of God and the circumstances of our birth, over which we had no control, we would be standing among them.

So we scan the landscape of the third poorest, most segregated city in America not intimidated by the scope or complexity of human need but responding to Jesus' charge to bring to him what we have for him to bless; and then to 'give them something to eat'; to eliminate the chasm in our community that allows some to eat and others to go hungry; some to work, others to have no work; some to live in safe neighborhoods others to dwell in communities where the social fabric has ruptured and crime claims innocent lives.

The feeding of the five thousand tells us our place is not on the sidelines or retreating into the safety of our protected and privileged lives but right in the thick of the people and places where there is hunger and fear and despair.

We can always offer up the excuse that we don't have enough technology or time or food or money but the feeding of the five thousand transforms that perspective to one of simply offering what we have for Jesus to bless and God to use to bring hope and healing to the world.

Gandhi died famously with his robe, his sandals and his wire rim glasses. All Jesus had was his robe and sandals – stripped from him in the end.

Out of such humble and materially modest lives God brings abundance to those who hunger and thirst.

He is right here; in the thick of our lives and the life of this church offering once again to relieve our hunger and fear and despair with a simple story and bread and wine. Amen.