

"God's Compassion---Our Compassion"

All four Gospel writers tell the story of Jesus feeding the multitude with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. That indicates that it was an important event for the early Christians. This story captures Jesus' care for the material and the spiritual needs of people. When people were sick, Jesus healed them. When they needed God's Word of forgiveness and love, Jesus spoke that Good News to them. When people were sad, he comforted them. When they were hungry, Jesus fed them. The people's needs were filled and their lives were fulfilled in Jesus.

This story of the feeding of the hungry crowd reminds God's people of the times in the past when God fed his people. After delivering them from slavery in Egypt in the Exodus, and the people were in the wilderness for 40 years, God provided manna to nourish them. You remember how God fed the prophet Elijah in the wilderness after he fled from the wicked King Ahab. This story was also important to the early Christians because it reminded them of the meal they shared in the breaking of the bread. Jesus' actions--he took the bread, he blessed, he broke, and he gave it to them---foreshadow his actions at the Last Supper.

In our Gospel story, Jesus is physically and emotionally tired out. He had just received the terrible news that his cousin, the one who had baptized him, John the Baptist, had been executed by King Herod. So Jesus wants to go to a deserted place to spend some Sabbath time and be renewed. It was a good idea, but the crowds followed Jesus and travelled far, determined to be near Jesus.

But when night was approaching, all these people were far from home with no food. The disciples ask Jesus to send the people away to buy food for themselves. But Jesus has a different idea. **He says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."** Jesus is calling his followers to use what they have, especially to use their compassion, to help people in need and make good things happen. The feeding of the multitude in the wilderness was not a spectacle to enhance Jesus' fame but a call for his followers to demonstrate their compassion and generosity.

The disciples were at first taken aback by Jesus' challenge. They, like many of us, had **an attitude of scarcity**---we don't have enough so we can't do this; we have only these 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. But Jesus wants his followers not to focus on what they do not have but rather on what God can do with what God has given them--**an attitude of abundance.** The message is

that when we offer what we have, then God can do wonderful things. When we try to meet a need, we can trust that God will provide.

We don't know exactly what happened that day when the multitude was fed. Many believe that Jesus literally multiplied the bread and fish in a miraculous way to produce great quantities of food. Others think that as Jesus and his disciples shared what they had, others were encouraged to share what they had until a loving community was formed and everyone shared what they could and received what they needed. That's a miracle, too.

This story is important for many reasons:

(1) It teaches us that we should not be so pre-occupied with our own concerns that we fail to help and support others in need. It is easy to think like the disciples and say, "send them away; they are not my concern". But Jesus calls us to care and to share.

(2) The story is a call to be a compassionate community of faith, one which hears and tries to respond to people's needs. "You give them something to eat," Jesus says. It doesn't matter what race or nation or language or background they have; if they are in need, we are called to respond.

(3) The story reminds us that all people are worthy of our compassionate concern, simply because they are hungry, sick, alone, or in need. God is like a loving mother who prepares a meal and provides enough for everyone.

(4) The story assures us of what God can do when we give God what we have. Five loaves and two fish don't seem like much. But Jesus says, "bring them to me." Incredibly, what seemed like so little, suddenly became a means for an amazing deed of compassion.

Even now, dear friends, in the midst of the pandemic and the economic recession, we can open our eyes and our hearts to those in need. We can listen to the voice of Jesus. Do not give up hope. Trust in God. Let God work in and through your life and your actions to show God's compassion for the world.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Steve