

God's Hungry People
Matthew 14:13-21
August 16, 2020

“There was a large crowd,” generally supposed to be over 5,000 “men,” because quite simply, women and children were not counted then, so realistically the crowd was probably more like 10,000 or more.

I have read this passage many times before, but this week it hit me in a completely different way -- a way that is almost surreal. This is not just a story that happened back then. It is a story about what is happening right now. I see thousands of hungry people driving into food banks, because they have no more food to feed their hungry families. I see thousands of people waiting in line to be tested for the covid virus. I read about millions of people who are unemployed, trying desperately to hang on after their unemployment benefits expired last week. I hear on the nightly news about thousands of small businesses across the country that have had to shut down, many of which will not reopen. There are hundreds of thousands of worried, anxious people whose loved ones are in the hospital with covid, and they are unable to visit them. Thousands of people are on the verge of being evicted from their homes as eviction moratoriums are set to expire. And I watched on the news the story of a young, single African American woman who had \$3.52 in her bank account, and a family of four to feed.

It was in that light that I read the gospel account of the 5,000 hungry, desperate people today, feeling at first sad, then angry. I am sad and heartbroken for these people because of their desperate, agonizing plight, and I am angry and outraged that our leaders aren't doing more to relieve human suffering and take care of the American people. I am outraged. Are you?

The virus is unavoidable, but it could have been managed so much better, and thousands and thousands of lives could have been saved. How would Jesus respond to so many dire needs today? Well, to answer that, we only have to look at what he said to the disciples. He put the solution squarely back on them. “You feed them. You do something for these hungry, hurting people.” Let's take a further look at what was happening in the story.

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The miracle of feeding the 5,000 is recorded in all four Gospels (see Mark 6:35-44, Luke 9:12-17, and John 6:1-14). That tells you all the gospel writers thought it was important. John mentions the time of year in his version. He tells us that the Passover was near, suggesting that Jesus will deliver God's people from bondage and provide bread or “manna” for their needs, just as Moses had done in the OT.

Today's story follows the brutal beheading of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod.

Jesus retreated in an effort to deal with the grief and loss, and to have some time alone. But thousands of people discovered where he was staying, and followed his every step. They were hungry and hurting, but rather than rebuff their needs, Jesus “had compassion for them and cured their sick.”

As the day wore on, they grew hungry, though the disciples begged Jesus to send them away. Jesus said to the disciples what he is saying to us today: “*You* give them something to eat. I am leaving it up to *you*. I am leaving it up to *you*.” But the disciples acted helpless, and so Jesus took control of the situation, and asked what provisions were at hand.

He wanted to test them and ask them to solve the problem. It was at that point that Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up. He looked around, and said: "There's this boy with five barley loaves and a couple of fish." Jesus said, "Bring them to me."

An interesting side note is that the loaves were made of barley flour. It was the flour that poor folks used for their loaves, not what the rich people used. In any case, the little boy had faith. He couldn’t believe his ears that Jesus wanted something from him. He trusted Jesus when the disciples did not, and gave him the loaves and fishes. It was all he had.

We all know what happened next. Everyone was fed as much as they wanted, and then they gathered up the scraps, and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the loaves left over by those who had eaten.” I have sometimes wondered what happened to the crowd the next day when they were hungry and it was time to eat again, but I hope they learned a lesson and trusted God to provide.

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I don’t believe Jesus was a magician. I am not here to explain how it happened. I am more interested in talking about generosity and compassion, and what that means for us today. That is something we can all practice. I do believe there is a dimension of reality far greater and beyond what we can comprehend. Don’t limit yourself to your own understanding. Jesus was able to tap into some transcendent power, and harness it for earthly good.

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One thing is for sure: God’s provisions and resources are always bigger than our own. God’s dreams are always bigger than our own. God’s solutions are always bigger than our own.

Capitalism would lead us to believe that we live in an economy of scarcity, and there is never enough. Too often, those who are well off comes at the expense of those who have too little. Why do we buy into the myth that there is not enough to go around? Millions starve because our culture operates with a system that limits distribution of goods and resources in order to protect the security of the few. Jesus showed us a better way. He

fed thousands of hungry, desperate people when they sat down on the grass, and they ate to their heart's content.

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We can do better. We have to do better. We can let our legislators know that it is time to approve benefits for those who are unemployed so that they can make it for another day. It is time to offer assistance to small businesses that are struggling to stay open. Some of them were not even able to get PPP loans when they were available. People should be able to live in dignity with enough food for the table and a roof over their heads without fear they are going to be evicted. Jesus offers us a challenge, and puts the problem squarely in our laps.

Do you know someone who needs a job? Do you know someone who is hiring? Let them know. Do you know of housing options for someone who may be about to be evicted? Some people I know volunteer at the food bank. The street chaplain's ministry prepares over 200 tacos every Tuesday night and hands them out in the parking lot at the Presbyterian Church. Our church provides gift cards for underserved students so they can buy school supplies this fall. We can make a difference.

Jesus may as well have been talking to us today, except there are far more than 5000 people who need help. People are still hungry. People still need jobs. People still need housing and other kinds of help.

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Before I leave you, there is another aspect of the gospel story I would like to address. It is not just physical hunger that is a problem, but we are facing a deep spiritual and emotional crisis as a nation as well. Let's not just feed the body while neglecting the soul. Jesus always treated both. Nearly fifty percent of Americans say they are experiencing at least mild depression or anxiety.

Michelle Obama did a world of good when she came out lately and said she has been suffering from some form of depression during the pandemic. Maybe that will encourage more people to own their feelings and talk about it, and seek help when needed. People are desperate to get out and see friends and family members. People dearly miss giving and receiving hugs. We all miss singing, which in these days has become a dangerous activity.

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As we conclude for today, I have no doubt that people can benefit during the pandemic by utilizing their spiritual resources. Some people have said it is the way they get by. What are you hungry for today that food alone cannot provide? Remember the power of prayer that is available to you at any time. Many of you have said how the prayer chain has been a lifeline. It is a way you are staying connected and informed. Thanks to Julie for her wonderful efforts.

You can also avail yourself of silent prayer and meditation. You can come to our Thursday group on lectio divina. As you push aside your own thoughts and worries, God can fill the empty spaces with peace and wellbeing. The bible can provide hope and consolation. Remember the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for forty years without a home.

God's people are a hungry people. The bread and cup will sustain you. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never hunger." It was enough for the five thousand. May it be enough for us. Amen

Matthew 14:13-21

14:13 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.

14:14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

14:15 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."

14:16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

14:17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

14:18 And he said, "Bring them here to me."

14:19 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.

14:20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

14:21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.