

## ***Ministry that Demands the Impossible***

Our New Testament reading is Mark 6:30-44, as we look at Jesus' miraculous feeding of the five thousand. It's the only miracle of Jesus found in all four gospels, and is obviously crucial to our understanding.

*The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. <sup>32</sup> And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. <sup>33</sup> Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. <sup>34</sup> As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. <sup>35</sup> When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late, <sup>36</sup> send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." <sup>37</sup> But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" <sup>38</sup> And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." <sup>39</sup> Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. <sup>40</sup> So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. <sup>41</sup> Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. <sup>42</sup> And all ate and were filled; <sup>43</sup> and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. <sup>44</sup> Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.*

This past week I did something I never thought I'd do—I went to see a therapist. I confessed I was tired and needed some rest and relief, not just from caregiving tasks, but from my expectations, emotions and stress. Jesus and his disciples needed rest from the demanding crowds. Our text shows that as they were heading for retreat, the crowd intercepted the disciples and thrust upon them their pressing needs. We see against the backdrop of the disciples' weakness and fatigue "ministry that demands the impossible." Likewise, my calling as a husband-caregiver and as pastor of this church is overwhelming. I depend on times of respite from my tasks.

The twelve disciples were so delighted to be getting away for a few days of respite. As they approached the retreat setting, a "deserted place," there is this huge mob of people! No doubt the reaction of the disciples is one of irritation and agitation.

But Jesus' response to the crowd is one of compassion. This was a crowd of people who had run possibly as far as ten miles to intercept Jesus. John, in his gospel, tells us their motives were less than pure. They were seeking healing

and free food. Yet Jesus could see them as “sheep without a shepherd.” He was moved with compassion because he saw their every need—the physical, spiritual, moral, and eternal need for a shepherd of their souls.

The reason we’re moved to irritation instead of compassion is our inability to see what Jesus sees—pain, suffering, loneliness, hopelessness, and empty hearts as well as stomachs. His compassion dangerously leads to sacrificial action and personal involvement. This word for compassion is used only of Jesus in the New Testament. It’s used of a pity that expresses itself in active involvement in meeting needs. Jesus alone has and gives this kind of compassion.

We’re more inclined to be sentimental than compassionate. We live in a sentimental age, and sentiment/emotion can too easily substitute for Christian compassion. Eugene Peterson writes:

“We live in an age that has replaced compassion with sentiment. Sentiment is feeling disconnected from relationship. Sentiment is spilled compassion. It looks like concern; it could develop into compassion, but it never does. Sentiment is the patriotic catch in your throat as the flag goes by—a feeling that never gets connected with the patriotic honesty of paying your income tax.

“Sentiment, says Peterson, “is the tears that flow in a sad movie—tears that never get connected with visiting your dying friend. We feel sorry for people; we lament the pain and suffering in the world. But having felt the internal motions of pity, wept a few requisite tears of sorrow, and sent off ten dollars to a charitable appeal, we’ve exhausted our capacity to care. In this callous dog-eat-dog world, how sensitive we are! We return to our homes and jobs without knowing the names of the people we’ve shed tears over, without visiting a single prisoner whose fate we lament, without writing one letter to the lonely over whom our hearts break. And of course we let no stranger into our double-locked homes.”

This miracle was performed in a “deserted place” (32). Although there was a crowd of many more than 5,000 people, yet it was a solitary place, a situation described as “a lonely crowd.” We live in a society that is crowded yet very solitary and isolated. People are longing for relationship. Those outside Christ, caught up in this impersonal culture of superficiality and alienation, need the love of a personal relationship with God and with his people of compassion. Unless we connect with people in a personal, practical and caring way, we run the risk of sentimentality.

As you know, evangelism, sharing the Good News in Madison, requires relationships. You have to gain the right to be heard, and that comes through relating to people in practical, caring and loving ways. Somehow we must break out of our indifference and even our sentimentality, and become truly compassionate. Jesus gave the parable of the Good Samaritan when asked

about the way to eternal life. If you have grace in your life, Jesus said in effect, then you respond to human need with compassion (Luke 10:25-37).

The disciples wanted to be in that “solitary place” to get spiritually refreshed. How often we think we could get it all together if we were able to do more reading and resting and retreating with our brothers and sisters in Christ. There certainly is the need for quiet times of personal worship and even retreating with one another or in personal solitude. But compassion comes by connecting with others, especially those in need.

Leander Keck says that the disciples’ advice to Jesus to “send them away” (36) reveals the attitude of cliquish-ness. We today, even as followers of Jesus, are always tempted to withdraw into the small group with which we are most comfortable. It’s naturally easier to spend time with those like us. Yet Christian love takes us outside the group. When we’re focused on ministering to outsiders, our fellowship with the group is richer. When outreach is the focus, fellowship is the result. When fellowship is the focus, cliquish-ness is the result.

Compassion is a discipline. Jesus said, in the context of relating to the material, that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). He didn’t say, that where your heart is, there your treasure will be,” as if giving follows feeling, emotion, or even passion. The very act of giving stirs concern, emotion and compassion for others. You make the investment and *then* your heart becomes compassionate. And churches like Dale Heights that are places of love and acceptance are churches that are doing something for others.

Although the disciples suggested he send the people away, Jesus seized the opportunity to demonstrate his miraculous provision. He told them they should give the people something to eat, and they gave a common sense reply. The needs were indeed overwhelming. There were 5,000 men, along with the women and children, who were never part of the count. The crowd was likely closer to 15,000. They didn’t have the resources. To buy enough food to feed this crowd would take the equivalent of 200 days’ average wages. All they had was, according to John’s account, a young boy’s five small, flat barley loaves and two pieces of dried, salted fish to spread among some 15,000 hungry people!

Today we need to see what Jesus sees. Likely he sees some who have never experienced his saving grace, forgiveness and love. The ministry needs God might show us may be no further than our own spouse or families. Right now, they are the ones in the desert needing the bread of life, and the loving compassion of Jesus, who will feed them materially, spiritually, emotionally, and relationally.

Jesus Christ says to us, “You give them something to eat.” Lloyd John Ogilvie says, “Beware of the paralysis of analysis!” As churches and individuals we can get bogged down in analysis of the problems and needs, and think that somehow

by studying it and singing about it, and even by preaching about it we are compensating for not doing it! One pastor (Wiersbe) said these disciples would have made ideal committee members! He said, "Someone defined a committee as a group of people who individually can do nothing and collectively decide that nothing can be done. To do Kingdom work, we need Christ's compassion and also cooperation with him and with one another, as we are yoked together for the task.

Jesus created a situation of human impossibility that required a God-given, supernatural solution. All true Kingdom of God work depends on the supernatural. Even the very nature of the church, let alone its mission, requires the supernatural. God commands the impossible and so he gives the power to do it. Jesus said, "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that I may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:12-14, NIV).

God uses people, like the boy with the five loaves and two fish (John 6:9). It's easy to talk about living by faith, but faith calls for action. What we do shows what we really believe. Jesus was able to multiply the resources that came from a little boy's lunch to feed about 15,000 people.

When the disciples looked at their resources, they were overwhelmed to the point of irreverence! "You have commanded the impossible! Get real!" is what they were in fact saying to Jesus. The life and work of faith relies on God to multiply the resources. All he asks is that we give what we have to him. God wants us to give him ourselves, and then he takes us in our weakness and uses us. As has been said, God's not impressed by our ability but rather by our *availability*. I've never before in my life felt more incapable of meeting the challenges before, but that's probably good.

As Paul said, God uses our weakness to reveal his power: "For whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10).

In this miracle-parable, Jesus revealed himself as the good shepherd, caring for his flock. In fact, Mark seems to make this connection in verse 39, as he makes the sheep, the people, lie down in green pastures (Psalm 23). Jesus has the power to transform our place into his green pastures where we are able to receive the full measure of his blessing. Here the great shepherd distributes the bread of life. We can also detect a foretaste of the covenant meal, the Lord's Supper, which we will share this morning, as Jesus breaks the bread for the people (John's account makes this connection especially). Jesus the Redeemer who gave manna to the Israelites in the wilderness, now in his incarnation reveals himself as the bread of life.

When the disciples had served alongside Jesus they received each one a basket full of bread and fish. They also found they were refreshed and perhaps, when they got into the boat with Jesus, found themselves rested (verse 45). They came to this desolate place looking for rest, and instead found themselves in the midst of ministry. Yet, strangely enough, they were rested and refreshed. The more we give to Jesus and minister with him, the more he is able to bless us. Jesus shows us that ministry that demands the impossible discovers the miraculous, refreshing power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

After this ministry of feeding the five thousand, the disciples received their needed strength and rest. Afterwards, they got into a boat and encountered a storm. Then, after the storm, there was another crowd, with their pressing needs. The ministry never ends, nor the demand for grace and strength to do the humanly impossible. They were strengthened by the food Jesus provided (verse 42). He is the one who calls and enables us.

Jesus says to us as he did to his disciples in our text, "You give them something to eat." You may feel like you're in a desolate place, with nothing to give, and overwhelmed by the needs of your children whose daddy has abandoned them. But Jesus can feed them through your faith and faithful involvement in meeting their needs.

Does he want you to feed others through your sharing Jesus with these people who surround your life? Does he want you to feed others through sharing your financial resources and by giving of your time and energy? Does he want you to feed others by giving your time? I know he wants me to love and care for my wife, faithfully and sacrificially, and with his love, patience and kindness.

This is the Lord's Table where all are invited. Think of this bread and of this wine as the life of Jesus given for you and now offered to you. And think of these elements as you partake of them as the presence of Christ who lives in you. And because he lives in you, he will supply every need of yours. And, remember, the same Lord Jesus is within each one of us, even as are the bread and wine. And you too are an apostle, a "sent one." As you take the bread and wine, remember that you can give Jesus and his love to your friends, family and acquaintances in your sphere of influence. Jesus says to us today, "You give them something to eat."