

The holy gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, according to Matthew. Praise and glory to God. Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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. Jesus said to them, They need not go away. You give them something to eat. The disciples replied, We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. And Jesus said, bring them here to me. 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, gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate, and were filled. And they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, 12 baskets full. And those who ate were about 5,000 men, besides women and children.

Please.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be ever pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock, and my Redeemer. Amen.

So, this passage actually starts a sentence earlier. And the sentence that comes before what I just read to you is, when Jesus heard this. When Jesus heard about John,

And in order to make sense of what we read this morning, we need to back up and know what it was that Jesus heard about John. So, this passage, this event that we now call the Miracle of the Feeding of the 5,000 comes right after the story of Herod's banquet, wherein Herod's daughter dances so well that Herod offers her anything within his power. And does anybody remember what she asked for? John's head. Not only John's head, John's head, on a platter brought to her in the dining hall. And Herod complies. And so what Jesus has just heard about is the very bloody, awful death of his cousin and fellow rabble rouser. The man we now call John the Baptist, the man who baptized Jesus, and in a very real way, ushered him into his public ministry.

I have cousins. with whom I am probably not nearly as close as Jesus was with John, and if I had heard one of them killed in a horrific, tragic way, I think I would want time alone with my family. And that is possibly what Jesus was doing. Jesus and his disciples withdrew to a deserted place. The wilderness. One would presume that they were wanting to go and be alone. Maybe to pray, to grieve most certainly, and one theologian suggests, maybe, to hide for just a little bit from the authorities, because remember, one of the reasons that Herod was holding John was because Herod feared the crowds. We're going to come back to that in a minute. I think it's important. But now we've got this passage that I've read to you, which also says, And when the crowds heard it, the crowds heard what? When the crowds heard that Jesus was in the deserted place? Maybe, but maybe also when the crowds heard of John's death, and the actions that Herod had taken.

The phrase, that is used in both of those places, for when he heard it, or when they heard it, that's the same in the original language. And Greek is such a rich language with so many options for saying things that when the same word shows up, we pay attention. And so, D. Mark Davis, an author and theologian suggests that perhaps the crowds followed Jesus because they, too, had heard of John's death and were grieving, maybe were angry, and seeking John's fellow rabble rouser, John's fellow minister, John's fellow leader, to show them how to respond. That line of thinking puts a little bit of a new spin on the number 5,000. Does anybody know why? What was the size of a Roman legion? 5,000 men.

For years, I've wondered, why in the world does Matthew say 5,000 men besides women and children? Because Matthew's gospel is not one that discounts women and children. There are

important women throughout Matthew's gospel, and many of them are named when they aren't named in other gospels. And it wasn't until this week, when I read that statement, that the light bulb kind of came on. And I have to give credit here. One of the podcasts I listen to is called pulpit fiction. They're kind of my sermon preparation partners, in a way. And one of the hosts of that podcast pointed out that 5,000 men was the same size as a Roman Legion. And not only that, but these men had been healed, and fed. Jesus had at his disposal here an army. An army that would do anything he commanded them to, that would go wherever he asked them to go. This, I think, is where we are led to look this morning, in this hour, in this world, in which we currently inhabit, a world that so often leads us to thoughts of anger and revenge and violence. Jesus could have led these people, these men, this legion. to Jerusalem, to Herod's castle. Unless the Roman Legion, was in residence, they could have taken over the castle and taken revenge on Herod.

My sermon preparation partners also pointed out that this deserted place in which Jesus gathers with the crowds. That's likely the same deserted place that the spirit drove him to following his baptism. So the last time we were in this place, Jesus was tempted. Remember this story? Jesus gets baptized by John. The spirit drives him into the wilderness for 40 days, and during that time, the devil comes, and he tempts Jesus. And he tempts Jesus with a few things. Does anyone remember what was the first? To worship him. Almost. Almost.

The devil, the tempter took Jesus up to the highest peak, and he said, all that you see could be yours. Just declare it. Just claim your power, and you will rule. The first temptation was for Jesus to exercise Jesus' power in a worldly way. To rule over the world and essentially declare his autonomy from God. And Jesus doesn't. And there are a few more in there, but there was another temptation. Towards the end, when I'm sure Jesus was just, fasting is hard, and he had to have been hungry and thirsty, and the devil said to him, You can turn these stones into bread. Just do it. And Jesus responds with the line, Man does not live by bread alone.

But there is a parallel in the fact that we find ourselves and Jesus now in this same place of temptation. not the tempter, but with ability. He has exercised his power to create, to magnify bread, not to benefit himself, but to strengthen and sustain the people in front of him. And in a very real way, Jesus himself was the bread that was offered, Jesus' ministry and presence. And Jesus and his disciples very likely face the temptation to exercise the power of their influence over these people in a very worldly way. And what does Jesus do instead?

This comes next week. So I'm stealing the thunder of whoever is preaching next week, just a little bit, but I'm going to do it anyway. Jesus sends his disciples across the lake, across the sea, and Jesus himself withdraws to a quiet place to pray, and sends the crowds home. Again, Jesus shows us. the difference between man's empire and God's kingdom. Jesus chooses compassion instead of revenge and violence.

Think for just a moment about the contrast between Herod's horrible farce of a meal. And Jesus', meal of abundance and compassion. I'd rather be at this one. I'd rather be at the meal. Where Jesus sees this crowd that has been so compelled that they've come out into the wilderness without food. Jesus sees them. That's the first step. The first thing is Jesus sees the crowd. He recognizes them. So often, that is the thing that people in need or in turmoil, report is what helps them, is being seen, being heard. Being recognized as a human being. And Jesus sees the crowd, and he sees not an army to be disposed of in the pursuit of revenge, but people, children of God, to be nurtured and fed and valued. And Jesus has compassion on them.

This is a Eucharistic moment. We often associate this Eucharist, we will celebrate in a little bit with the Last Supper, and that is true. But this is also a meal that follows that same pattern. The Eucharist is a four fold action. We take the elements. We bless them. We break the bread,

and we give to the people. Jesus, here, took the bread and the loaves. He blessed them. He broke them to share, and he gave them to the disciples who then gave them to the people. Amy Jill Devine puts it this way, "The perverse image of John's head on a dish is replaced by the feeding of the 5000. The meal of horror yields to the foreshadowing, of the messianic banquet that sustains us still today."

And what is it that the crowds had to do in order to receive this meal, to be included in this abundance? You're drawing a blank, because the answer is they just had to be there. It was a little bit of a trick question, because that's all they had to do. They didn't have to profess Jesus' Lord and Savior. They didn't have to pledge to not do violence in the world. They didn't have to prove that they had followed the commandments all of their lives. All they had to do was be there. Just be there. OK, that's really neat. Because what do we need to do in order to receive God's grace in our lives? Be present. Show up. Show up.

A few months ago, I ran across a reflection that came, I work at a Catholic hospital, so one of the things that the corporate, the powers that be due, is send out inspirational things to our emails. And periodically, I have time to read them. So I read this one, because it was interesting. And it was a reflection by one of the executives of the corporation, but what he was sharing was the guidance he gave to his children, and the tagline was something like 15 words. And I think I always end up with more than 15. But it was just not that hard, and this is what he taught his children. First, show up. Second, pay attention. That really means be present, right? Show up and pay attention. The next was tell the truth. Okay. Speak truth. That's prophetic word, right? It can be challenging, and that's a different sermon, but I'm going to finish this out. The last one was let go of the outcomes. And I think that's part of what we're seeing here.

Jesus fed these people. And Jesus included his disciples in that feeding. Remember that in Matthew, it was, oh, a couple chapters ago, Jesus was moved by compassion, for the crowds, for the people that no one was caring for, and he commissioned his disciples to take part in his ministry, and he ended with, you will do greater things than these, meaning, he brought the disciples into his ongoing ministry and commissioned them and authorized them to do the same signs that Jesus was doing, to heal people, to feed people. to teach people. And so Jesus didn't go out and didn't gather up all of the fish and the bread. Jesus didn't give it out to the crowds. The disciples brought to Jesus at his request. The fishes and the bread. And then Jesus gave the fishes and the bread to the disciples, who gave it to the people. But Jesus did not, then, notice after the meal, Jesus doesn't teach them, right? This isn't a, Jesus heals them, feeds them, and then teaches them, and tells them what they should do in response to the meal. What does Jesus do? Jesus heals them, feeds them. and sends them home. Jesus trusts that God's actions in their hearts will lead to the transformation that comes from encounters with the divine.

When we find ourselves. present in our lives. Actually, paying attention to the people we encounter, it can get really uncomfortable, because inevitably we see people that we think we have to fix whatever is wrong in their lives. That's not our jobs. If we see someone who is hungry, first, we need to make sure they're hungry and not just think that they are because of, well, they look, because sometimes we do that. But when we actually ask someone, it's scary, in any context, to say to someone, what can I do to help you? Because maybe we can't do that. Even in asking someone, how are you? Is there anything you need? You're recognizing them as a person. You are seeing them.

I still remember when I watched the first avatar, has anyone seen those? movies? What was the thing that Jake had the hardest thing comprehending when he first met his woman? How did she greet him, eventually, after she stopped trying to beat him? She said, I see you. And he said, Yeah, yeah, I see you, too. And she said, No, I see you. He said, I see you in the trees and the flowers and the plants. And she said, No. I see you. And that's how Jesus and God see the

world. God sees every single person. And all our needs, all our gifts and all our potential. And God sustains us. God feeds us. God takes the meager fishes and loaves and turns them into a banquet, in which all can eat and be filled. God meets our needs, even when we don't necessarily know those needs, particularly when they are within our hearts.

And God doesn't just give us enough. Was there just barely enough food to feed everybody to satisfaction? No. And these weren't crumbs, these were portions. These were chunks of bread that you would have torn off to eat and pieces, you know, chunks of fish. And there was a basket for every tribe of Israel, that's why the 12 matters. God feeds us. We are called to this banquet. And we are called to this banquet so that we can take this message of abundant care and concern out into the world. This passage. This miracle of feeding is so much more than just a feeding of an army.

This is an in-breaking of God's loving presence, God's healing power, God's overwhelming, abundant. Some might say wasteful, but I prefer abundant, unimaginable generosity and compassion. Contrast this. with Herod's feast that went so very wrong. And I am reminded of the passage, where God tells the prophet, My ways are not your ways. God's kingdom does not rely on the destructive, hurtful. exploitative power of empire. But on the compassion, and the love which humanity was created to express in the world. For that is our purpose as human beings. Our purpose as human beings, as caretakers of creation, is simply to care. to show up to see and be seen, and to respond with compassion. Imagine what a world we can create. If we can imagine it, we can begin to see ways to get there. Even small ones. I saw a sign on the desk this morning out here in your entryway, and I'm going to screw it up. So you'll have to go look at it to get the quote right. But essentially, what it said in beautiful calligraphy, was, "I've realized I cannot change the world. God does that. But I can change the world for one person." And I offer that to you today, that as participants in this feast, As participants, recipients of God's overarching abundant compassion. Let us find ways. to bring that healing compassion to bear on whatever corner of the world we find ourselves in. Let us start by showing up. and seeing, and being. Amen..