

No One Is Full Until Everyone Is Full
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Isaiah 55:1-5 Matthew 14:13-21

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This may be one of the most well-known miracles in our sacred scripture. Not least of all because it appears in each of the four gospels. In two gospels there are actually two different versions. Often times we marvel at the supernatural miracle of multiplying so little food into so much. Or we try to figure out a mundane explanation for it. Maybe everyone actually had their own food that they were afraid to take out, but there wasn't enough for everyone unless they all shared. Whether it's an unexplainable miracle or a mundane occurrence, it's obviously significant. And, as is the case for many of our sacred stories, there is so much to this one that we don't always focus on.

This year, what stood out to me was the very first sentence: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." What he just heard was that his cousin John the Baptizer had been brutally murdered. Herod, who had had John imprisoned, was throwing himself an extravagant birthday party. He hadn't wanted to kill John because John was so popular with the people. Like Jesus, John whipped up the people with hope and righteousness. But Herod backed himself into a corner where he had to choose between John's life or his own pride. An insecure and self-centered leader like Herod cannot afford to lose pride. So not only was John's life lost, but perhaps his people's hope too.

The passage right before shows Jesus being rejected in his own hometown. The Common English Bible uses the word "repulsed" to describe the crowd's reaction to Jesus' teaching there. Jesus is used to being rejected, but this one must have hurt. And then he loses his cousin. I wonder if he sees John's death as foretelling his own. No wonder he wants to withdraw to a deserted place by himself. But the crowd of thousands follows him! Have you ever felt so alone and empty that you barely have the capacity to sustain yourself, much less to offer anything to others? What do you feel on Jesus' behalf when he just can't catch a flippin' break? Personally, I feel exasperation and resentment. But our text tells us that when he saw the crowds, Jesus had compassion for them and cured their sick. This year, the miracle for me in this passage is that through his exhaustion and grief, Jesus can still tap into his compassion.

And maybe it has something to do with the word compassion. *Passion*, in this word, doesn't mean a strong feeling. It means "suffering," like in the Passion of Christ. And the prefix *com* means "with." Jesus sees the peoples' plight and he suffers with them. And, in fact, though Jesus tries to escape to a deserted place in his own boat, he can't escape that he and the people are actually in the same figurative boat. The same oppressive force that killed his cousin, that will eventually come for him, is the one that ensures food insecurity and poor health among the people, while leaders like Herod throw lavish parties and want for nothing. Before there is any need for fish and loaves, Jesus is presented with 5,000 men plus women and children who come to him not for teaching or conversion, but in desperate need of healing. And, like their Israelite ancestors, in desperate need of liberation. Sometimes, a parable of the kingdom of heaven won't

do. You need real healing, real food. Just like our kids dealing with food insecurity today need a full breakfast, and the promise that there will be a full dinner in order to learn their lessons at school. I'm reminded of what the writer James Baldwin says about children all over the world. He writes, "For these are all our children. We will all profit by or pay for what they become." I might add "or what becomes of them." Baldwin's sentiment applies to the children who have been bombed in Palestine to the children who qualify for free lunches in Moultonborough Central School, and every child in between. Jesus doesn't just feel sorry for the crowds, he knows his wellbeing is tied to theirs. Whatever this unjust world hands to the least of these, it hands to him. As Maya Angelou writes, "The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free."

After some time of Jesus healing members of the crowd, the disciples show up like Jesus' agents trying to coordinate this stop on the tour. I think that when they ask Jesus to send the crowds away, they are acting out of compassion given the possibilities that they can comprehend in the moment. We would probably just call them realistic. The amount of food that they had might provide a snack for the twelve of them plus Jesus as they made their way back to a village for dinner. But they are tapped out, they don't see any other options, and they have to feed their own, their little congregation. But Jesus had probably felt tapped out too, and he managed to reach a deeper pool of compassion.

When Jesus says, "No, *you* give them something to eat," he's talking to us today just as much as he was talking to the disciples in this story. We may feel called out or misunderstood. What can one person with mediocre skills and no connections do? What can one rural church with a little congregation and few resources do? My impulse is to give a realistic answer like the disciples do: I can't imagine how to do this. Let's just take care of our own and trust that others will find villages elsewhere. Afterall, if you pull too many people into the life boat, it'll sink, right? I immediately feel a little defensive. But perhaps, when Jesus says, "You give them something to eat," it isn't a demand to do the impossible or an accusation for having not done enough, it's the empowerment to access resources we didn't know we had, an invitation to consider possibilities we couldn't imagine.

I remember being a child and knowing what I was and wasn't capable of. But I also remember from time to time, going to my parents to report some issue or lay on some request and them saying, "*You* can do that." The possibility that I could, in fact, do the thing had not crossed my mind. But those were the moments when my world opened up in ways I couldn't imagine before. I realized I had more agency, more inner resources, more strength. Do you remember times like that in your childhood, adolescence, or maybe even adulthood? Who says it has to end there? I wonder in what new ways your world will open up in the near future, where the kingdom of heaven will break in and shine a light in a place within you that you didn't even know existed before. I'm sure it's happened before – in your own life, in this church's life, in the wider community's life – and I'm sure it can happen again. It takes a lot of courage to have deep compassion, to suffer with the least of these in a world with increasing wealth and power disparities. And no one of us can be free unless everybody is free, no one of us can be full unless everybody is full. But Jesus fills us with more courage and stamina and imagination than we think we can contain. So, watch out for those little times when the kingdom of heaven breaks through, when the light bulb goes on, when your world opens up; and take heart. Amen.