

I speak to you in the name of God our creator, the risen Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, our advocate and guide. AMEN.

Did you know that the story of the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels? Additionally, the feeding of **four** thousand is told in Matthew and Mark. As an aside, please take note of verse 21 in today's reading: "And those who ate were about five thousand men, **besides** women and children." While there's a whole other sermon in that, for today, let's just acknowledge that there were many more than the five thousand men fed. Of those six accounts of Jesus feeding a very large crowd, four of them state emphatically that Jesus had compassion on them, and it is implied in the other two. The Greek word used here means "to be moved in the inward parts." Jesus is moved with compassion. This isn't static, but active. This isn't a head thing, but a heart thing. It is not an intellectual response, but an emotional response, resulting in action.

As is always the case, context is very important to understanding our Gospel reading today. Did you catch the first few words? "Now when Jesus heard this." Heard what? It must have been something important, perhaps even difficult, because he withdrew to be alone. Difficult is an understatement! It was the news of the death of his cousin John the Baptist. John had been in prison for some time for accusing Herod of adultery with Herodias, his brother's wife. Herod throws an exclusive VIP feast for his birthday, inviting his rich and powerful friends. Herodias is most displeased with John so when her daughter's dance at the feast pleases Herod, and he tells her she can have whatever she

wants in return, she asks for John the Baptizer's head on a platter. So, Jesus was grieving, heart sick at the loss and the manner of the death of the one who had baptized him, his cousin, mentor, and fellow prophet. But Jesus didn't get much time for private grief and contemplation. The crowds were already gathered and waiting for him when he got off the boat. No rest for the weary here. If it were me, I would have frantically told the disciples to turn the boat around! Get me out of here!! The disciples too would most likely be grieving the loss of a fellow worker in the kingdom of God. After all, some of Jesus' disciples were previous disciples of John. In Mark's Gospel, we are also told that the disciples had just returned to this news from the mission Jesus had sent them on. They would be exhausted and possibly just a little afraid. This prophet business is dangerous; you could lose your head!

And Jesus wasn't the only one to meet God in his grief. In our Genesis reading today, Jacob arrives at the Jabbok River alone—exhausted, afraid, about to face the brother he'd deceived years earlier. All night he wrestles with a mysterious figure who turns out to be God. Jacob doesn't win by strength—he wins by holding on. He ends the night with a dislocated hip and a new name: Israel, 'one who struggles with God.' Jacob encounters transformation not in his wholeness, but in his brokenness.

And then in Romans, Paul tells us he carries great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for his people who haven't accepted Christ. He's so consumed with grief he says he could wish himself cut off from God if it would

save them. Three figures in three different Scriptures, each carrying deep grief. Three figures meeting God not in their strength, but in their vulnerability.

When Jesus sees the crowd and despite, or is it **because of** his own heartache, he has compassion on them and immediately begins to heal and teach them. I wonder if he spoke about John. Did he share his own sorrow with the people? Did they mourn together? The historian Josephus tells us that John was well loved by the people, and the gospels tell us that the people revered him as a prophet.¹ Matthew doesn't tell us the content of his teaching that afternoon. What we do know is that come evening Jesus tells his disciples to feed the people. I imagine the weary and grieving disciples are looking at each other and saying "Are you kidding me? What do you expect from us?" Maybe even thinking about throwing their hands up in the air and giving up; walking away. Because in direct contrast to the sumptuous feast of Herod which resulted in John's death, the disciples have just five loafs and two fish. Five loafs and two fish to feed a multitude! How often have you thought that what you had to offer was not enough? Especially if you are grieving or exhausted by what life throws at you? Do you feel like you have nothing to give; that you are tapped out. We overwhelmed by the multitude of issues in our communities and across the world. The need is so great, and we have so little to give. We live in a worldview of scarcity which believes that there is not enough for everyone. Some hoard what they have, and others despair that they have nothing to give. But in God's economy, an economy of abundance, what you have **is** enough, because it is never all that there is! When we trust God as the disciples trusted Jesus, He is

¹ Josephus Antiq. 18:118; Matt. 21:26; Mark 11:32; Luke 20:6

able to do **infinitely** more than we can ask or even imagine **through** us, with what we have to offer!!

Now I feel I need to give a word of caution here. We are not to try to meet the need through our own efforts, on our own. We are not to fill the need with our own resources, whether financial, emotional, or time. Therein lies the path to burnout and resentment. The whole point is that God meets the need through us, multiplying what little we have to offer. Through this we learn to trust God to do the heavy lifting. We are **not** the saviours of the world, or even our community. Contrary to popular thought, we are not meant to be martyrs, at least not in this way.

I have had a very interesting experience during my discernment for ordination. As much as I feel a call to be a priest, I feel very strongly that I am not called to be a parish priest. I am the type of person who picks up the balls that drop. That's a recipe for burnout in the church. When I first voiced this concern eight years ago, I was informed that I was resisting God's plan for me. If I was saying no to this, then I was saying no to God. So, I thought that this would be my biggest challenge as I met with examiners. Much to my surprise and relief it was the very opposite response. The examiners all stated that they were very happy to see that I had good boundaries. Through the work of the Holy Spirit the church has grown in the past eight years. We have come to realize that the priest can't and most certainly shouldn't do everything or even most things in a parish or faith community. There is this really harmful trap of deception in the call to give your all to Jesus. It's kinda two-fold. One aspect is

the church's expectations of their minister **and** of their congregation. In many cases it has amounted to spiritual abuse. The other is fed by our society's focus on producing. The individual feels a compelling drive to produce at work and this translates to the church. As soon as we move our focus off of what God can do **through** us and on to what we can or should do, we have lost the plot! It may feed our ego, but it doesn't feed our soul or true self in Christ, or the community of faith we are trying to serve. It is only through a humble offering of our broken and weary selves that God can work miracles. If we try to do it in our own strength, we hinder the very work of God.

So back to our Gospel story. Jesus takes the meagre offering of five loaves of bread and two fish. He breaks and blesses the bread and suddenly the five loaves become enough to feed many thousands of people **with** leftovers! He doesn't create the bread and fish out of nothing; he takes what the disciples give him and multiplies it. All of them are tired and grieving, but they bring what they have and offer it up to Jesus who breaks it and blesses it as Jews have done for millennia, *Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.*

This is exactly what Jesus does at the last supper, foreshadowing his death. Each time we partake in the eucharist, Christ's body is broken for us in the bread, and it is multiplied in and among us. St. Augustine offered this blessing when serving the eucharist: "Behold who you are, become what you receive." We come to the altar with what little we have, our own broken and exhausted selves and receive the abundant economy of God's grace. Christ meets us with

the loving gaze of compassion and transforms us, changing us from glory to glory until Christ is all in all.

I invite you to come to his table, just as you are, confident in God's unconditional love for you, and let him heal your wounds and transform your pain. Behold who you are **as a beloved child of God**, now become what you receive.

Amen.