

“Considering the Rest of the Story”

Matthew 14:13–21

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Some of us remember listening to a radio broadcast called “The Rest of the Story” hosted by Paul Harvey, that is, some of us born before a certain date that we need not name. Each episode explored a familiar topic, unveiling lesser-known details that were at least interesting, if not astounding. It was a fascinating broadcast, second only to the CBS Radio Mystery Theater for me, and there was almost always some benefit in knowing more about a given subject.

Perhaps this is the case with our Gospel reading today. It is a very familiar story, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, as we call it, though that isn’t the right number in the text, many more than five thousand are fed. But it is the only miracle found in all four canonical Gospels, we have heard more sermons on it than we can count, thus we may feel like we know all there is to know about it.

But there is more than meets the eye here, much more than a miraculous feeding. There is value in other parts of the story which only enhances our view of the feeding. So, it seems worth considering the rest of the story.

We should begin with the very first sentence which says, “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” When Jesus heard *this*... what exactly did he hear? There are advantages and disadvantages of using the Revised Common Lectionary, one of the latter being the fact that sometimes we join a story midstream or without any context. What Jesus and the disciples have just heard is that John the Baptist has been executed by Herod.

So, the one person in this world Jesus is closest to, after his mother and father, has just died in a brutal way. He has to be emotionally distraught, not to mention a little fearful. He and John are about the same work, part of the same Divine strategy. If John’s actions have led to his

death, Jesus' actions may do the same for him. Matthew 14:4 says it is politically expedient to kill John because of his criticism of corruption among the leadership class while Jewish historian Josephus says it is because of his popularity (*Antiquities* 18:116-19). Both explanations apply to Jesus as much as they do to John. He criticizes leaders and he is popular. No matter how much Jesus may know about his future, he has every reason to be fearful at this point, in addition to profoundly sad.

So, he tries to get away on a boat. We can't blame him, he is fully human, according to the teachings of the church. He needs some time alone to process things, to deal with his own emotions, but as is so often the case, crowds of people follow him anyway. Don't they know? Can't they give him a little space? Apparently not, they have needs, and quite often a group of people do together what none of them would choose to do alone. This happens in churches to this day, which is part of why clergy are often overwhelmed and exhausted.

But Jesus sees the crowds, and while he has every right to tell them to go away, he responds to their needs with compassion and moves among them curing the sick. It is the way Jesus always seems to proceed. When he sees human need, he responds with compassion, *splagchnizomai* in the Greek, a word that means "moved in the guts," an image we might not want to ponder right now, with a parasite named *Cyclospora* troubling many guts... but the point is that Jesus is moved deeply, so much so that he goes about curing people who are sick.

Genuine compassion always leads to redemptive action for Jesus, it is never simply feeling sorry for someone, and Jesus always seems to find a way to respond to human need, even when he is exhausted or spiritually drained. When a Syrophoenician woman asks him to help her daughter who has a demon, his first response doesn't appear very compassionate, but he heals the daughter (Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28). In our reading, distraught Jesus cures the sick.

Beyond what this says about who Jesus is, there is a message for us here as his followers, but it is not that we should work ourselves to exhaustion and respond to every need, no matter what. Jesus has access to resources that we do not, and he only lives thirty-three years. I'm about to double that in just over a week. I can't do now what I did at

thirty-three. Numerous people have noted over the years that our guiding question ought to be not, “What would Jesus do?” but rather, “What would Jesus have us to do?” Our story doesn’t recommend workaholism nor does it seek to convince us that only we can accomplish a given task.

It does suggest that we respond to human need with compassion. Judgment, indifference, and hostility are not options for followers of Jesus. And we are talking about genuine compassion which leads to action at some point, even if we feel weary, vulnerable, or wounded. In fact, our woundedness can be an asset.

In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen offered many insights of enduring value, including this (p. 72).

After so much stress on the necessity of a leader to prevent his/her own personal feelings and attitudes from interfering in a helping relationship, it seems necessary to re-establish the basic principle that no one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with his/her whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded, or even destroyed in the process.

We are all wounded healers, in the sense that we all have wounds, and while a person drowning may not be helped by someone else who is drowning, nor will they be helped by someone who has never been in the water. I’m speaking metaphorically, don’t push the image too far, but the best help often comes from someone who has struggled in some way, perhaps even like us, whether it is with guilt and shame, feelings of inadequacy, addiction, bullying, or a deep questioning of faith. Jesus heals the sick, even when he is wounded, even while dying on a cross. As his followers, we are called to risk ourselves when others are hurting whether they are friends with personal challenges, people living with poverty and violence, or immigrants and LGBT people being mistreated.

So, there is much to help us in a part of the story we rarely consider. In fact, while the feeding of the 5,000 and more is miraculous, and showy, the curing of the sick along the shore may be a greater miracle. Those who have been fed a meal will be hungry again soon.

Some of those who have been cured of sickness may never be sick again. That's the rest of the story, or at least part of the rest of the story.

But there is a miracle of feeding in our text, a rather large one. The text says about 5,000 men ate, in addition to women and children, thus many more than 5,000. It is another act of compassion performed by Jesus when he is carrying a heavy load, though we don't know exactly how he does it, we'll get to that. But this part of the story also highlights a tension we often struggle with in the church today.

It is the end of the day. There is still a large crowd. It may not be Miller Time, but it's eat'n time! These people need to get to one of the villages nearby and find some food. Jesus tells the disciples to give them something to eat. They complain, saying they only have five loaves and two fish whereupon Jesus has them bring what they have, offers a blessing over it, and gives the food to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. Quite astonishingly, not only does everyone get a bite to eat, but all eat until they are full and there are twelve doggy bags left over!

It is a miracle of some kind, no doubt, but why do the disciples not want to help? Is the tension between compassion and indifference or abundance and scarcity? I'd like to think it is the latter. I'd like to think the disciples feel compassion too. They just don't see how they can help. They are distraught and fearful like Jesus. It's been an exhausting day, much has been accomplished, but now the need is beyond daunting. Perhaps they are just being practical, realistic, like we are at times. Some needs are too great. We can't feed every hungry person. We can't meet every need. What good will it do to help a few?

This is the first place Jesus might differ with the disciples and us. He'd say feed who we can, clothe who we can, make a difference where we can. We might think of the man throwing starfish back into the ocean or Mother Teresa telling those who questioned her work with the poor, "I was not asked to be successful. I was only asked to be faithful." But beyond doing something and thus not being overwhelmed by the immensity of need, Jesus also always seems to find a way to make a big difference.

We know people like that. I think of a missionary in Uganda who always found a way. When Idi Amin came into power, he took his family

to Kenya for their safety, but he refused to leave his work. When he drove back to Kenya for a visit, and they saw bullet holes in the side of his car and their faces paled, Web said, “Don’t worry about that, they weren’t shootin’ at me!” When a factory that made blue jeans closed, and all those pants were going to be discarded, Web found a way to get tractor-trailer trucks to pick up the jeans and distribute them to people in need. There are people who find a way to get it down.

There are also people who can always find reasons why it won’t work. I remember a man who opposed a community garden we launched in another setting. I thought he would be the first onboard. He had a vegetable garden at home, he wanted to help people and build community, and he eventually came around, but when the idea was proposed, he spoke against it for numerous reasons. There are dreamers and realists, and we need both in the church, but if we only have realists, our feet will never leave the ground. Jesus was a dreamer.

He could also perform miracles, but what kind of miracle does he perform here? Does he magically transform a few loaves of bread and fish into several supermarkets of supply, microwave a massive feast? Or does he pray over a small amount of food made available and use this to encourage others to share what they have? Even if the former is true, the disciples distribute the food, it doesn’t magically appear on plates before people. And even if the latter is true, it doesn’t mean a miracle hasn’t taken place. Enabling people to get past their fear and self-interest to grow in compassion and share more with others is a miracle!

In the end, we don’t know exactly how it works, we only know it does. Abundance wins out over scarcity. There is enough for all. It’s okay to have tension in the church, realists are welcome and needed, but we lean toward abundance, and trust that we can make a difference.

That’s the rest of the story today. We know about a feeding, but there is more than a feeding. There is compassion extended even amidst pain and fear. Some are healed and others are fed, and there are many ways in which these miracles might proceed, which means we can do this kind of work too.