

### Matthew 14: 13-21 Stay for Dinner

It is another beautiful morning in Jemez Springs. Some of you who live north of here have been enjoying cool mornings and felt even chilly, I heard. It is a beautiful gift when we wake up and can count the blessings in our life, when we can go to church with a well-rested body and a grateful heart to worship God and give thanks. We are ready to listen to others and offer encouragement and support. We're too blessed to be stressed, as they say.

Then, there are those mornings, we wake up and the first thing we remember is a friend who just received a difficult diagnosis, or a family member going through a rough time, or the last night's news of yet another story that reminds us just how broken and unjust our world is. It may hit us any time of the day. We may be doing just fine, and bam! we are faced with the reality of the Evil in this world. Instead of going out to face such world, we feel the need to retreat and regroup, so we can heal and hopefully regain our strength.

We find Jesus in just such moment, at the beginning of the Gospel reading today. "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." What did Jesus hear? Jesus had been teaching the great crowd about the kingdom of heaven, in parables and vivid images and explaining them to his disciples, and then ...

Then, he received the word that John the Baptist had been killed, by Herod, the puppet ruler of Galilee propped up by the Roman government. John the Baptist, that fearless prophet of God who baptized Jesus, who had prepared the way for Jesus, the co-laborer for the kingdom of heaven, was now dead, literally for speaking truth to power, and John's disciples came and told Jesus.

When Jesus heard this, he got into the boat to go to a deserted place, to be by himself... He needed to withdraw from the crowd, Matthew doesn't tell us why; perhaps he needed to grieve, understandably, and even to contemplate what might await him, and most certainly, to pray, as he often did. Jesus was in a grieving, vulnerable place, needing to "retreat and regroup."

But, when he arrived at the shore, guess who were waiting for him; a great crowd. They had followed him, walking along the shoreline to meet him in this deserted place. At this point, you almost feel sorry for Jesus who cannot get away from the crowd. But, instead of feeling frustrated or annoyed, Jesus felt compassion for them.

The word "Compassion" is made of 2 words in the original Latin. "Con" means "with" and "passion" means suffering, so com-passion literally means to "Suffer With." Only someone

who knows suffering can be with the suffering of others. If there is any use for our suffering, it enables us to be with others in their suffering; it gives us the capacity to be “compassionate.” Having compassion for the crowd, Jesus healed those who were sick.

Now it is in the evening, and the disciples states the obvious: “This is a deserted place, a wilderness, and it’s already late in the evening. Send them away so they can buy food for themselves.” Given the situation, that sounds like a perfectly practical suggestion. If Jesus doesn’t send them away, they wouldn’t leave and without food in such a desolate place, they’d be in trouble.

Besides, the disciples had had a long day too; perhaps they were tired themselves. They’d been following Jesus, teaching and now healing the great crowd. They, too, had heard what had happened to John the Baptist, and they were a bit weary of what might happen to their teacher. Perhaps, they were starting to suffer from “compassion fatigue,” that feeling that you have no more compassion left to give. You don’t have it in you anymore. We know that feeling; we’ve been there. They are spent, physically and emotionally, feeling depleted themselves. How can we help others from a place like that? At this point, they are like, let them take care of themselves.

Then Jesus suggests something outrageous: that they stay for dinner. He says to the disciples, “they don’t need to go away; you give them something to eat.”

To make their point clear, the disciples respond to Jesus “all we have here are five loaves and two fish.” Surely, Jesus must understand, it is hardly enough to feed this crowd. Again, the disciples are just being rational.

But I wonder, at this point, if something started to click in the mind of some of the disciples. I wonder if any of the disciples were starting to recall the stories about the kingdom of heaven Jesus had been telling them, how something small and insignificant is transformed into abundance. I wonder if any of them were starting to connect the dots. After all, after Jesus had told many stories about the kingdom of heaven, he asked his disciples if they understood all those things, and they answered “Yes.” Can they recognize it then, when the kingdom of heaven is unfolding right there and then, in their midst, in the face of scarcity. Do you think we could recognize it, in the time of our great needs, needs of the church, needs of our families, the needs of the world...

Jesus tells his disciples to bring the bread and fish to him and had the crowds sit down on the green grass. Taking the bread and the fish, Jesus looked up to heaven... and looking up to heaven is a posture of prayer, an expression of our reliance and dependance on God. Then he blessed the loaves, which is an expression of thanksgiving to God. And fully trusting in God, he broke the loaves and gave to his disciples, to give to the crowds.

Jesus didn't take matters into his own hands; he didn't work the miracle all on his own; he turned to the source, the One Who Provides, the One who gives us this day our daily bread. Jesus turned to the One who long ago provided the Israelites wandering in the wilderness with manna, the bread from heaven. He relied on the One whom the writer of Psalm 23 said had laid him down on the green pastures.

The disciples who could only think of how little they had to share, in terms of both compassion and the food, felt overwhelmed when they saw how great the need was. But Jesus, who was suffering a great loss himself and was coming from a vulnerable, diminished place, by turning to God, tapped into the very source of both compassion and the sustenance.

When the disciples gave the bread to the great crowd, there was more than enough for everyone. Transformation of five loaves of bread into 12 baskets of crumbs after the multitudes ate to their hearts' content. Scarcity to abundance, a tell-tale sign of the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus had only spoken of as parables and images, is now the lived experience of the disciples themselves, perhaps giving them and us an even fuller sense of the kingdom of heaven.

This miracle has its name: Compassion. There are a few things that are miraculous about compassion. Firstly, Compassion is born of suffering. It is our ability to suffer with those who are suffering because we have suffered ourselves. Suffering is not of God, but compassion is. Compassion is God's handiwork turning the suffering into our ability to care deeply.

Secondly, Compassion moves us into action. Jesus had been teaching the crowd about the kingdom of heaven through parables. But, when Jesus saw how the crowds had followed after him into the deserted place, he had compassion for them and he sprang into action, he started healing them. Compassion moves us to the act of loving kindness, when is there is suffering but also love. Suffering is not of God, but Love is.

With God, where there is suffering, there is also even greater Love that acts to save. To the hungry crowds, compassion says "stay for dinner." In the prophet Isaiah's words,

compassion says “everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

This is the only miracle story that is recorded in all four Gospels. It shows up even twice in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, in the variation of “Feeding of the Four Thousand.” This story, perhaps even more than the parables and metaphors Matthew recorded, must have said something about this new community the early Christians were experiencing.

At the same time, it is not told as a parable but as something that the crowds and Jesus and his disciples experienced. It is not about what the kingdom of heaven is like, but it is the kingdom of heaven unfolding in their midst. The scale of the transformation is miraculous, five loaves to feed five thousands. It begs the question, “Did it really happen?”

Matthew doesn’t tell us the details of how this late-night dinner party unfolded, but we are told that the first act of compassion was not feeding but healing. The disciples were passing on the bread to the people Jesus had healed. What had they been healed of, I wonder? Perhaps among them were those healed of the sickness of selfishness, greed, anxiety, distrust and even the misguided belief that one is and should be self-sufficient and self-reliant. Perhaps Jesus cured of their hearts of stone and gave them the heart of flesh that can receive compassion and be compassionate to others. Perhaps it prompted those who received the bread to then share it with others. Perhaps, the healed and changed people had something to do with stretching that five loaves of bread to satisfy five thousand. Jesus, is the head of the new family he is creating, providing food and pronouncing the table blessing, even today: Take, eat, and pass it on...