

Community Spread

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Matthew 14:13-21 New Revised Standard Version¹³ Now when Jesus heard [that John the Baptist had been executed], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed [Jesus] on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ 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, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

One of my favorite aspects of summertime is the evening. After we've had our dinner, I still have several hours of daylight remaining. I might do some yardwork. Maybe I'll sit in a rocker on the porch working a crossword puzzle. Perhaps Parker the Dog and I will walk to the lake. Those summertime hours of evening daylight are a gift not to be wasted.

I wonder if appreciation for those bonus hours of daylight is at the root of the story we heard today from Matthew's gospel. First of all, I think it's safe to say that we know this story, commonly called "the multiplication of the loaves and fishes." In fact, the gospels contain *several* stories of *multiple* occasions when Jesus fed entire crowds with little more than a packed lunch.

Let's put this story in some context. Just prior to this episode Jesus had recently returned to the town of his childhood — Nazareth. There he had been given the opportunity to preach in the synagogue where he had grown up. It had not gone well.

Oh, I'm sure he preached a good message. But the people who remembered him from his childhood days had a hard time accepting him. They couldn't believe that Joseph's and Mary's little boy could be that insightful and learned. "This is the carpenter's son?" they asked skeptically. "Mary over there — this is her son?"

Disappointed, Jesus said to the congregation as he walked out the door, "A prophet is highly esteemed except by the people of his hometown, except by the people who should know him the best."¹ Still in that funk, disciples of John the Baptist arrived to tell Jesus that John had been executed by Herod.

Grieving his second cousin, and grieving yet another abuse by the Roman Empire against the people of Palestine, Jesus made his way down to the Sea of Galilee. He got into a rowboat and pushed off to seek solace on the calm surface of the water.

The local townspeople quickly got wind that the popular teacher Jesus had just passed through their village. They looked out onto the lake and saw him rowing toward

¹ Matthew 13:53-58

a farther shore. So the people left their villages and followed him by land. Jesus came ashore at a spot somewhere between the nearest villages. There he found a crowd of thousands of men and women and children. His compassion overcame his sadness, and he started right in to heal those who were ailing.

Jesus worked for an hour... several hours... many hours.... By now the twelve disciples had joined him, and as the dinner hour approached, they told Jesus that he should send the crowds away to buy themselves something to eat in the nearby villages.

I can imagine Jesus looking at the sun still fairly high in the summer sky, realizing there were still several hours of daylight that would be wasted if he sent the people away. So he told his disciples, "You all... you give them something to eat."

They protested, "We're not prepared for that. We don't have anything to give them. Well, nothing except, um, five loaves of bread. Oh, and two fish. That's it."

Jesus signaled the crowd to seat themselves on the ground. Then he did what he would later do at the Last Supper in the Upper Room: he took the loaves, blessed them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples. They gave the bread to the people. Matthew's gospel then reports, "Everyone ate and had enough. Then the disciples took up twelve baskets full of what was left over."²

In their message on Youth Sunday a few weeks ago the kids described something that apparently resonated with a lot of you, based on the feedback I heard. Rather than springing for an occasional so-called random act of kindness, they suggested that we take the risk of reaching out to others with what they called "radical hospitality."

They proposed that we find the courage to offer "radical hospitality" from our faith in Jesus who showed us the power of unconditional love to break down barriers and bring people together. We might say that this story of the "Feeding of the Four-Thousand" is an instance of giving the people an experience of "radical hospitality."

There's another term that this story brings to mind. In recent months we've heard the term "community spread." The phrase has a negative connotation. It reminds us that a pandemic occurs because people unintentionally share a virus with other people, and the sickness spreads.

I suggest that this story of the feeding of the multitude is a story about "community spread." But what's being spread is not an illness; it's a grace-inspired approach to living. As the dozens and hundreds and thousands of people sat down with one another, did they realize that they were not simply going to *eat* a meal but *share* a meal?

This story illustrates that a sense of community spreads. Compassion spreads. Generosity spreads. Acquaintance spreads. Picture that lakeside meadow with Jesus, the disciples, and scads of people. Jesus told them to have a seat, and people sitting down with one another got to know each other. Maybe they were with people from their own little village. Maybe they sat down with folks from a village on the other side of the mountain who they became acquainted with as they sat and waited and shared and ate.

Acquaintance spread. And as they became acquainted, compassion spread. They no longer saw strangers from another village; now they saw fellow Galileans with a common desire to learn from Jesus, to adopt his manner, to reflect his faith. In one

² Matthew 14:20 New Revised Standard Version

another they began to see themselves, and their capacity for compassion began to spread.

And as compassion spread, a willingness to be generous spread. Certainly:

- some of the people there had a snack tucked away in their tunic;
- they had the bag of vegetables they had been carrying from the market;
- they had some dried fish they'd been nibbling on as they worked.

They took whatever they had, broke it up and passed it around their little circle.

Community spreads because acquaintance spreads, and then compassion spreads, and then generosity spreads. The miracle that occurred in this story was not a catering miracle but a miracle of community-building.

That's what Jesus calls us to do. Jesus inspires us to seek to come together with one another, to bring people together.

- That can happen when we first simply acknowledge each other as God's worthy creatures.
- Then we strive to respect one another whether we see eye to eye or not.
- Then we're called to care about one another and, when it's possible, to care for each other.

Yes, even in this extra-challenging time when we're limited in our ability to get out, to get together, to come together, Jesus inspires us to be community builders, to build and support a sense of communal shared responsibility.

"Community spread" ... it doesn't have to be a negative term. As people embracing the manner and mind and heart of Jesus, it is a sense of community that we're called to value, to create, to sustain, to spread.