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“Not Practical, But Compassionate”
Text: Matthew 14:13-21 (Romans 9:1-5)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The story that we heard today, of Jesus “Feeding the 5,000” as it has come to be known, even though there were more than 5,000 there that day, for there were 5,000 men *plus* women and children, whose numbers could have swelled the crowd considerably - this is a story found in all four Gospels. And so it is probably familiar to all of you. Today we heard Matthew’s account of this story, the simplest account of the four, and the one which provides us with the fewest details. Which is quite unusual for Matthew, who likes to tell us how all that Jesus did was according to this or that prophet and in fulfillment of this or that Scripture.

He omits from this account **Mark’s** emphasis of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, that Jesus sees the crowds as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, and has them sit down on *green* grass (Mark 6:34, 39), a lush pasture, even in the wilderness, for His sheep. We might have expected Matthew to include this and then add that this was in fulfillment of Moses’ prayer, that the people of God not be harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Numbers 27:17), or concerning the *green* grass, to let us know: as it says in Psalm 23 . . . But he doesn’t.

In the same way he omits **Luke’s** emphasis on Jesus teaching the people and speaking to them of the kingdom of God (Luke 9:11) before feeding them, to which Matthew could nicely have added references to Samuel or Zechariah, of God as Israel’s true king (1 Sam 8:7; Zech 9:9), or of the kingdom *of truth* Jesus had come to establish.

And he omits the details that **John** includes of the fact that Jesus was testing His disciples, for He knew what He was going to do (John 6:6). Or the fact that it was the time of the Passover (John 6:4). Or that it was a young lad who, in fact, had the five loaves of bread and two fish (John 6:9). Lots of fodder here for Matthew! Of Jesus being the prophet greater than Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15), and Jesus as the new and real passover.

All, you could say, important details. But without them, strip away all those details from this story, and what you have left is Matthew’s account, and the clear focus he wants to highlight without any other clutter: **Jesus having compassion.**

Now maybe you’re used to hearing that, of knowing Jesus that way. But I think it is worthwhile to think a little bit more and a little bit deeper about compassion and just what that means. And first, to do that by realizing what compassion *isn’t*: it isn’t practical.

In this story, it is the disciples who are practical. They are experienced in the ways of the world. At least some of them were businessmen before leaving that life behind and following Jesus. They knew the value of a denarii. And so it was only reasonable, it was common sense, it was *practical* for Jesus to send the crowds away. The reasons were many: it was a desolate place. The day was almost over. No way was there enough food out here in the middle of nowhere. Maybe the disciples' own stomachs were rumbling and grumbling. So be realistic, Jesus. It's time to send them away.

But Jesus never does the practical thing. He does the compassionate thing. Compassion interrupts us and our lives and what we were doing. Compassion stops what we're doing in order to see to the needs of someone else. Compassion makes us go out of our way to help another. Compassion means sacrificing yourself because something else has come up, whether that means sacrificing time, or money, or energy, or sleep, or whatever else you were really hoping to have or get done today. To help a family member, a neighbor, or even a stranger. That's why compassion is so hard and increasingly rare in our world today. Our world where I don't even have enough time to get done what I need to get done, let alone stop and help someone else! Our world of tight budgets, little time, and lots of demands. *Compassion just isn't practical.*

So how does a compassionate Jesus respond to His practical disciples? He invites them to be compassionate too; to be compassionate with Him. ***They need not go away; you give them something to eat.***

And their response: *We are not able. We have only five loaves of bread and two fish.* So Jesus says: ***Bring them here to me.***

I don't know if Jesus said that with exasperation, disappointed that His disciples still didn't get it. Or if He had a little smile on His face. I suspect it's the latter, the smile. Jesus the compassionate having compassion on His disciples too. **To teach them that with Him, there's no "only."** When you have Jesus, you have everything. Enough to feed 5,000 men, plus women and children. Enough to feed a world full of Christians with His Body and Blood. No place is desolate or empty when Jesus is there.

Brodi - that's something for you to especially remember this day as we bid you godspeed as you leave for the seminary. You're going to have a lot of times - as a seminarian, as a vicar, and as a pastor - where you think you are not able; you don't have enough; you have "only" . . . whatever. But remember: there's no "only" with Jesus. When you have Him, you have everything, and far more than enough.

So Jesus takes the bread and fish and looking up to His Father, says a blessing. He says grace. A thank you. Thank you for the people. Thank you for these disciples, even if they don't quite get it yet. Thank you for the food. Thank you for the opportunity to feed them

all, to teach His disciples what they need to learn: *that God isn't practical - He's compassionate.*

So after giving thanks, Jesus gives the bread and fish to the disciples, that they do what He told them: ***you give them something to eat.*** They do, and much to their surprise, they are able. Jesus even feeds their rumbling, grumbling stomachs, too. Turns out, there is more than enough. ***All ate and were satisfied.*** Ready now to go home not in want or in need, but filled and content.

The God who is not practical, but compassionate. That's what Jesus shows us. That's who Jesus is. A God who cares about the needs of His people and provides. And not just spiritually and not just physically, but both, for we are both.

And this has been true all along - a compassionate, giving God. Paul wrote of all that God gave to His people in the Old Testament, as we heard in Romans today. ***To them,*** he says, ***belong the adoption,*** God choosing them out of all the nations on the earth; ***the glory,*** God Himself leading them and dwelling with them in a pillar of cloud and fire; ***the covenants,*** given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David; ***the giving of the law,*** God's glorious revelation on Mt. Sinai; ***the worship,*** the tabernacle, where God would be for His people to provide for them the forgiveness of their sins; ***the promises,*** of a land of their own, peace, protection, and all that they would need; ***the patriarchs,*** the fathers in the faith and God's perfect faithfulness to them; and ***the Christ,*** in the flesh, who is not just flesh and blood, but God over all, blessed forever.

So much had been given to them! So much has been given to us! But how often are we blind to it, and blind to our Lord's compassion. How quick to forget His work and faithfulness of old. How quick to look and trust only what I have in my hands instead of the fact that we are in His hands, and therefore think: *It is not enough. I am not able.*

Repent. Of your doubt, of your lack of compassion, of your thinking that God somehow hasn't given you what you need. There's no "only" with Jesus. With Him whose hands were filled, always, with compassion. Whose hands baptized you and now feed you. Whose hands shield you and bless you. Whose hands went to the cross for you. To pay the price you could not pay, not just for your food, but for all your shortcomings, all your sins, all your rebellion, all your doubts - that you have life. And not just life, but His life. That you who are thirsty may have drink. That you who are hungry may have food. And no mere bread and fish, but His Body and Blood, *given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.* To satisfy you so that now, in Christ, you are ready to go to your home filled and content, too. Your home here, yes, but even more, your home with Him, forever.

For you have Jesus. And when you have Him, you have everything, and far more than enough.

And having done so for you, Jesus invites you now to be compassionate too. Like the disciples, He gives to you what you need to do so. Including the heart. And to realize: this Christian life may not be practical. This Christian life may call on us to do a lot of *impractical* things, things that make no earthly sense - where we put our money, how we spend our time, things that maybe do not give us the biggest return on investment in the world's eyes. To get interrupted, to not get that thing done, to go out of your way, to sacrifice.

That's not always easy. *Maybe it's never easy!* That's okay. Maybe the interruption and the getting you to show compassion is the compassion *you* need right now! God is not practical. He's compassionate. And that's better.

Practical would have been to choose better disciples in the first place, right? Or better Christians; better yous and me. But God is not practical. He's compassionate. And that's better. And so you are a child of God.

And so we prayed earlier: *Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. That's the foundation. That's what we heard today from Matthew. So . . . Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience.*

Serve Him who has everything . . . *how?* We heard that today too: *by serving others in compassion.* Like Father, like Son. Like Son, like Christians. For *when you do it to one of the least of these, Jesus says, you've done it unto Me* (Matthew 25:40).

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.