

Matthew 14:13-21

14:13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

14:14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

14:15 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."

14:16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

14:17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

14:18 And he said, "Bring them here to me."

14:19 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.

14:20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

14:21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Proclamation of the Word

We're hoping for a miracle. I hear this all the time. Usually it has to do with a personal crisis someone is facing, an illness, a marital crisis, a trauma. And as we look at the news on a daily basis, I keep hoping for a miracle with wildfires out west, crossfire in Gaza, and despair on the US border where 85,000 minors have been found since October 2012.ⁱ

We're hoping for a miracle. And then we see signs of God's grace in the midst of the despair sometimes. Even in the face of terminal cancer persons of faith speak of healing and knowing God's presence more fully in the face of their illness. France is welcoming Christian refugees from Iraq to find safety from persecution. A Sudanese woman, Meriam Ibrahim, is not put to death for converting from Islam to Christianity due to international pressure. The Sudanese government is considering changing their penal code which demands the death penalty for those of other faiths.ⁱⁱ

Of all the wonders and signs that Jesus did, only the Feeding of the 5000 is written about in all four gospels. And while we might be amazed at what Jesus did, even better is why Jesus did what he did.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus, of course, is the fullest representation of God almighty and reveals God's character to us. Why did Jesus call for the feeding of the many? He had *compassion* on them. He saw them in their wretched need- hungry and many of them sick. He healed their sick, was present with them in their need, and in the evening when it was getting late, he fed them. Actually, Jesus called on his disciples to exercise compassion in the form of food and healing.

But as you have heard me say before, we must read the passage in CONTEXT. Context is everything. Jesus was going away to a deserted place for a little R&R because he just heard of the gruesome beheading of his cousin John, the Baptist. Herod had his head on a platter mainly on the whim of Herod's daughter, who wanted the party to be livened up. Matthew takes us from a decadent feast where murder is the entertainment to hungry, tired, and sick crowds. Remember the majority of people in first century Palestine lacked adequate nutrition and health. In contrast, Herod evokes images from a TV episode of "lifestyles of the rich and shameless." In our own country we have food deserts particularly in poor, urban neighborhoods where the majority of people shop for their groceries at the Dollar General and lack fresh, nutritious produce while others of us are overfed and reaping disease from our rich diets.

Here in the deserted place, the disciples tell Jesus to send these folks away to find something to eat which is a bit ridiculous in a desert. What does Jesus say to the disciples?

"They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Trained in crowd management issues by then, they were thinking practically. "We don't have what they need, Jesus, send them away." But Jesus has another plan. Then here in a deserted place, the disciples help in feeding the ones whom God loves, especially the poor and hungry. Those who most need relief. Maybe the real miracle is that disciples start feeding the hungry and forget their own fear of scarcity. They do the impossible with God's help.

Disciples keep doing this. A college Education major decides to spend his year in a vulnerable neighborhood serving with Teach for America. A successful career mother, gives up the income to stay home to care for a special needs child. Retirees and college students head to McAllen, Texas, to respond in compassionate ways to the thousands of unaccompanied children in detainment facilities and offer a bologna sandwich and a cold cup of water to the least of these. The miracle of sharing and serving keeps happening empowered by the Holy Spirit. The impossible becomes possible with God's help.

Jack Jenkins was in my Small group at the Montreat College Conference. He is a Presbyterian College alumni, Harvard Divinity grad, and religion journalist. Last week he spent a few days at the US/Mexico border last week. His reporting will break your heart. In his first article, "The Inspiring Work Done at the Border to Show What Jesus would do"^{iv} he describes the response of Christian community. The Sacred Heart Catholic parish hall has been turned into a clothes closet, so that children and mothers might find rest before boarding their bus with their ticket provided by the US government. Some days they host over 200 guests a day who are offered clean change of clothes, shoes, and a simple meal of water, soup, and Pedialyte for nutrients. Most are shell-shocked and traumatized. Sometimes those who serve in Jesus' name, just listen and allow God to use them for healing. The stories they hear stories of boys who are shot for not joining a gang, female children being raped, and rape being used a weapon for power and control. Sister Pimentel is not sure how long they can keep up the relief efforts,

but they will do all they can, she says. She is hoping our government leaders can reach some helpful response soon. In the meantime, she will keep looking for a pair of little pink shoes for the little girl who shows up on the doorstep of the church, and feed them on the compassion of Christ.

While Jack was there a new group of immigrants enter the building the whole group stops what they are doing, and after a moment, they break into applause and say, "Bienvenidos!" Welcome! The look on the faces of the women and children is priceless, it is the look of RELIEF.

Across town at the St. John's Episcopal church, Jack spoke with a rancher after worship who was helping prepare emergency kits in the form of 1 gallon Ziploc bags with a bottle of water and other necessities.

Jack writes,

Among the buzzing hive of packers at St. John's was Johnny Cozad, a soft-spoken rancher adorned in a classic western-style pocketed shirt and a shiny belt buckle. Pausing from his work to pour himself a cup of coffee, he told of his personal encounters with border crossings, saying that "thousands" of immigrants had passed through ranches like his on their journey northward. Ranchers often discover the bodies of dead and dying immigrants on their property, and some have teamed up in recent months to patrol their own borders in hopes of finding people before they are swallowed up by the Texas tall grass. He expressed general ambivalence about immigration issues, explaining that while many ranchers used to hire foreigners who wandered onto their fields, rumors of crossings by smugglers and drug runners have made them wary of approaching new travelers...

"For many of us, these immigrants can be destructive," he said. Some ranchers have been known to forcibly resist immigrants, holding them at gunpoint or even shooting at trespassers when they find them on their land.

If someone comes through my ranch and needs water or food, I'm gonna give it to them. No question.

But when asked if he thought it unusual that a Texas rancher, the veritable poster-child for American conservatism, would so eagerly participate in relief efforts to help undocumented immigrants, Cozad looked shocked. It angered him that anyone would question the need to provide direct assistance to travel-weary migrants, and made mention of other ranchers who leave out water for travelers before invoking the biblical charge to care for those in need.

"This is separate," he said, nodding to his priest and waving his hand at his fellow church members. "If someone comes through my ranch and needs water or food, I'm gonna give it to them. No question."

When the disciples approach Jesus and ask him to send the thousands of people away to go find food, Jesus says, "You feed them."

And then Jesus took bread and some fish and broke it. It was shared among all. And all were fed. That is how the grace and compassion of God is. Maybe the real miracle is that the disciples got to participate and caught a glimpse of the Kingdom of God right there in their midst.

Every time we gather at this table of grace, the Lord's Table, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and offers it to you and to me, those of us who gather in his name. His very life is broken for the sake of all God's children. His very blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins, so that we might be made well.

In turn, we are commissioned like those first disciples to go forth to share God's good gifts with those most desperate to feed on it. May we like these be found faithful.

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ⁱ www.houstonchronicle.com/news/article/Houston-religious-leaders-call-for-welcoming-5655232.php?t=5adbad0510

ⁱⁱ <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2014/07/28/3464635/meriam-ibrahim-italy-lupo/>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose blog at www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-8a-the-real-miracles/

^{iv} Jack Jenkins, *The Inspiring Work being Done at the Border to Show What Jesus Would Do*, July 24, 2014.

<http://thinkprogress.org/immigration/2014/07/24/3463127/texas-border-religion/>