

**HE HAD COMPASSION; MATTHEW 13: 13-21; AUGUST 23, 2020;  
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Did you know that in addition to a pandemic there's a famine in the land; I don't mean a famine of physical hunger but one of hunger for human connection. From grocery shopping, to going out for dinner with friends, to gathering for family affairs like weddings and memorial services, even visiting loved ones in hospitals or nursing homes—old ways of seeing each other and being together are limited or prohibited because of a deadly virus.

We are adapting to an austere diet of human interaction less defined by our former daily routines and increasingly shaped by the ubiquitous Zoom meeting or simply cold-turkey abstinence. A huge habitat of human connection and community is turning into a barren landscape of virtual images. We all have examples. I used to enjoy spontaneous chats with my neighbor when we were both outside working in the yard. Now, masks on, we wave.

The famine I refer to is the loss of the myriad ways humans find emotional, spiritual, and mental nourishment from being in one another's presence. A church is an excellent example; take Westminster or the Holloway Chapel; studies confirm that people stay in congregations not because of the preaching or choir or stained glass but because of the people; picture the familiar, friendly conversations, one on one, in pairs and small groups that goes on at our Meet and Mingle at Westminster or out on the lawn after worship at Holloway—interactions we no longer take for granted.

We are after-all social creatures. But I'm not sure we are being fed the proper nutritional value in this new world of self-isolation, quarantine, and mask wearing; robust, healthy, vital humans need more sustenance than Twitter feeds, Instagram images or Facetime.

Evolution has constructed us to depend upon and use social interaction for the preservation of our species. Morality and ethics, empathy and compassion, cooperation and peaceful settlement of disputes are the fruit not just of the image of God in which we are made but of eons of the struggle to survive against hostile forces. Our advantage over our environmental competition (often physically stronger and faster) is our ability to socialize and form community.

But this new world of minimizing in-person social interaction goes against the grain of our instincts and needs. Thus, for the past five months we have essentially been on an extended fast—depriving ourselves of social touch points, social connection, social fulfillment individually and as communities—from schools and churches to neighborhoods and nations.

Turn with me to the infamous 'feeding of the five thousand' from Matthew's gospel. It is a story so old and familiar we may no longer be able to hear it or discern its meaning.

But we can rediscover the power of this story in its own context. We have stories like this in the Bible because they were considered so powerful in their original setting that they were chosen as essential reading for followers of Jesus.

The context of today's episode when Jesus has compassion on the crowd and instructs his disciples to feed them is another dinner party that precedes today's story; this other event is at Herod's palace—tables laden with fruit, meat, vegetables, breads and sweets and unabated lascivious behavior—in other words, an old-fashioned orgy right here in the Bible!

Herod, as most scholars agree, was a sociopath and narcissist. Everything was about him—from his ostentatious palaces and residences to his opulent, obscene parties. In one sense, therefore, he was easily manipulated by those pretending to fawn over him.

When Herod sees his step-daughter perform a seductive dance in the middle of the party and interprets her sensual movements as attraction to him his ego inflates like a hot air balloon; he is so taken he offers her anything she wants in his kingdom. To his dismay she asks for the head of John the Baptist, at the behest of her mother, who has planned the whole seduction and is settling an old score against John. Having promised her anything Herod could not renig on his pledge, yet he realizes the deceitful, vengeful trap he has been caught in.

The second dinner for five thousand is a compassionate counterpoint to every sordid, self-absorbed detail taking place at the king's palace. Amid a situation of human need Jesus is moved by great compassion, curing the sick and providing a bountiful meal for the crowds even though he himself is in danger, for word has spread that Herod thinks that the itinerant rabbi, so popular with the people, is, in fact, John the Baptist raised from the dead. Herod cannot stand the competition of anyone's popularity and appeal surpassing his. The two stories together are a snapshot of what plagues humans on the one hand—greed and ego; and what sustains us on the other hand—compassion and generosity.

A dinner of great abundance where the people are starving versus a dinner of scarcity where the people are filled. This is classic New Testament Gospel, turning the tables, reversing the order—the first shall be last and the last first, the weak strong and the strong weak, the foolish wise and the wise foolish. Welcome to Jesus' upside-down world where everything that matters gets turned right side up.

Of course, for this world to exist at all, there need to be those who are last and weak and foolish; in other words there need to be followers of Jesus, first the disciples, then you and me who I'll get to in a minute.

What is so fascinating about this story, in addition to revealing the social and spiritual malnutrition of the rich and powerful at Herod's place in Jerusalem is the role the disciples play up north on a hillside at Lake Galilee. Jesus' compassion has rubbed off on the disciples. They become concerned about the lateness of the hour and the lack of food for the multitudes. Plus they act on Jesus' orders that seem preposterous and yet the crispness of their response and their unquestioning obedience make them models of faith worthy of our attention. They represent what it means to participate in Jesus' ministry of compassion by doing what they are told without any prior briefing or even a plan for how it will all work out. In the simple act of caring for others they discover the depth and power of compassion to nourish and sustain human life.

What's the big deal you ask. Isn't that what compassion is—humans nurturing, strengthening humans by caring for one another?

Yes, but it's easier to talk about compassion than put it into practice—especially if the recipient of your compassion is not someone you are favorably disposed to.

Like the Good Samaritan who had compassion for one who could be considered an enemy while those who were of the same tribe walk by avoiding eye-contact with the victim.

Which brings us right into the present. The reason I say there's famine in the land is not just due to the pandemic that has sped up the trending to reliance on social media for all human communication and trending away from real human interaction. We have been isolated into special interest silos across the liberal / conservative spectrum for a long time now.

What is different perhaps is that it is more clear than ever that this is an unsustainable model; how much of the body politic can be hollowed out and still have something left; or better *what would be left?*

Rich Roll the endurance athlete and nutritional expert we follow in our house said recently, "when the pandemic hit I felt equipped to manage the threat better than most because I am emotionally and physically strong and because I'm an introvert and prefer my alone time. But I've come to realize just how much I long for, *make that need*, meaningful interaction with my fellow humans. A craving for personal connection from the spontaneous passing encounter at the coffee shop to lingering meals with friends, the absence is felt. The result is dips of melancholy, with moments of creative high and glimpses of gratitude; a roller coaster surging from grace to somber over and over.

Maybe we multitude of Americans have more in common with that multitude of people on the hillside listening to Jesus than we thought.

Like them we are growing more and more hungry. Like them we're essentially sequestered until a story like this moves us as the real situation did the disciples who brought the situation to Jesus' attention and he instructs them to feed the people. When they do Matthew says, when we do is the message today, the people are filled and there are baskets of leftovers. Abundance.

This is no rabbit out of a hat magic trick. It is what happens when we don't just talk about compassion but act on it; Matthew's account is a wonderful illustration that this ministry isn't just about words but deeds. Feeding people. And that we already have everything we need, two fish and five loaves of bread. Or, you could say, enough in-person touch points, even in a pandemic, even behind masks, to exercise compassion, to reach out to fellow humans and feed God's sheep. I'm not saying compassion can't be expressed online, of course it can, but the impact of physical presence next to a Zoom image is like a protein fruit smoothie next to a corn chip.

Oh, the biggest surprise of all? When you give compassion away by doing something for someone, empathizing with their situation, affirming, commiserating with, standing by them in whatever way they need a fellow human to do, you—the giver of compassion—get to keep your compassionate heart. Compassion is one of those things like love and faith and hope that you have to give away to hold onto.

We're Presbyterians, I don't expect daily travels to turn into a love feast—just an encounter where people find welcome and concern and brother / sister love they didn't expect and don't have to earn.

Pretty soon we might all be feeling better, stronger, happier; the sharp edges of our differences softened, the great collective soul of our church, our city, our nation revived. Amen.

