

My first summer here was the year the air conditioning went out, maybe halfway through June, and we discovered that they no longer made the parts to fix it. If you remember, or for those of you who weren't worshipping here at the time, it took a couple months to update the heating and cooling system in here, so for the rest of that summer, we held worship in the Fellowship Hall where the air conditioning was working. That was the same year we put out signs on the day of the community yard sale, inviting folks to use our parking lot and to stop in for a snack, a bottle of water, and to use our restrooms. People were grateful, so much so that some of them showed their appreciation by leaving us a few dollars...in the bowl of the baptismal font that was set up at the back of the makeshift sanctuary. Out of context, it was probably not obvious that's what it was, and their donations certainly came from a place of gratitude, but also, I'm guessing, a pretty common reluctance to accept pure acts of generosity or free gifts of hospitality, even from church—that is, from those of us who are supposed to be all about pure acts of generosity and free gifts of hospitality. We don't like to feel beholden to anyone, even for something as small as a drink of water or the use of a toilet. I don't think it was a commentary on our church specifically, but somehow the Church in general has earned a reputation for attaching strings to our good works. That never should have happened, considering our holy scripture includes Isaiah's invitation *Everyone who thirsts; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price...* and Jesus' instruction to the disciples, *You give them something to eat...* But we still hear proud Christians talking about cutting assistance to the poor as if it's a moral victory. Whose morals? we have to ask.

Jesus feeds the multitude in all four of the gospels, making it the only miracle story, aside from the resurrection, that all four evangelists recorded. Matthew tells us that Jesus has just heard about the beheading of John the Baptist, so we read about this life-giving meal that Jesus provides on the lakeshore in contrast to the deadly banquet that Herod hosted in the palace. King Herod delivers John's head on a platter to keep his foolish promise to his stepdaughter to give her whatever she asks for after she pleases him by dancing for his guests. Her mother manipulates them into murdering John. After hearing this news, Jesus attempts to get away by himself to mourn John who was both his cousin and the one who baptized him. John's death would have brought into very clear view where Jesus' own ministry was leading him. After all, John had been imprisoned for criticizing King Herod's illegal marriage to his brother's wife; even though John was right about the Law, the religious leaders didn't come to his aid, because they were enjoying their proximity to Herod's power. Like John, Jesus had been challenging the values of earthly kingdoms and getting into arguments with the religious experts. With John dead, it was reasonable to guess that Jesus would be next. So maybe Jesus wanted to lie low for a bit.

But the crowds will not let Jesus alone. This is the second time Matthew tells us that Jesus sees a crowd in need and feels gut-wrenching compassion for them. He cures their sick until it starts getting late, when the disciples ask him to send the crowds off to buy food for themselves. Where thousands of people all at once are going to buy food at night in ancient Galilee, I don't know; but the disciples are ready to pack it in for the night and ask Jesus to get rid of everyone else.

*They need not go away*, Jesus says. *You give them something to eat*. And although the disciples believe their five loaves and two fish are insufficient, Jesus takes what they have and turns it into a blessing for the whole crowd. Everyone sits down on the grass, like sheep the shepherd makes to lie down in green pastures, and the disciples distribute the food to the crowds. They all eat until they are filled—far more than sick people who've been wandering all day in a deserted place expect. And just to drive the point home to the disciples, they collect 12 baskets of leftovers—one for each disciple to carry, evidence of the outrageous abundance of God.

We've talked before about how rulers in the ancient near east presented themselves as shepherds caring for their sheep. That was usually propaganda, but Jesus actually delivered—feeding people like the self-proclaimed benevolent rulers were supposed to do, but rarely did. Jesus was being a little rebellious by gathering a crowd and giving them provisions. Did you ever think it was weird that the evangelists all say it was 5,000 men, besides women and children? Why say *5,000 men* when it's likely that that women and children together made up a much bigger number? 5,000 was the number of soldiers in a Roman legion. So, Jesus essentially has the captive attention of an army, who because of his acts of miraculous compassion, are now healthy and well-fed—two of the greatest challenges to any military force. If there ever was a time for Jesus to march on Jerusalem and take over the existing kingdom for the kingdom of heaven, this is it.

But of course, Jesus doesn't do that. John's gospel even tells us this crowd wanted to make Jesus king by force, but he slips away to prevent them. If we want the kingdom of heaven to reach into the whole world, we can't expect that to happen by military might or political power, by coercion or force. It's only going to happen through the same radical, generous compassion that Jesus himself showed—healing the hurt and feeding the hungry, not because they do anything to deserve it, or because they pay for it, or because they can reciprocate, but because God has given us people to love and resources to share. We practice each week in the Eucharist, coming to Jesus with empty hands to receive the bread that heals our hearts and feeds our souls. We call that a foretaste of the feast to come, but that doesn't have to mean only the heavenly banquet. We can help this broken world look more like the good garden that God created by following Jesus' example of compassion put to work. May God help us do that until the whole Church is known not for attaching strings to our kindness, but for setting tables where everyone is filled.