

August 23, 2020

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**Reading:** Matthew 14:13-21

**The Message:** The Miracle of Generosity

[Video](#)

What do you think happened here?

Jesus had just heard about the beheading of John the Baptist and he needed time on his own to grieve, so he pushed off in a boat for a deserted shore.

But people wanted to see him, to hear him, so they flocked from the towns around to where he landed. In his own grief, he felt for them -- a dispirited, heart broken, gut wrenching pain.

He healed them -- the physically sick, the spiritually sick.

The first important act was Jesus' act of compassion. God is a compassionate God, a God of healing.

It may have been that Herod's act of killing John was just the final straw for some of these folk. Too powerful to overthrow, too cruel to endure. What is left?

Herod's government is ultimately a government of scarcity... Anything or anyone who challenges the narrow vision of power is destroyed. Jesus the Baptist was beheaded during a feast. Worse, his head was presented to Herod at this feast, on a platter!

You may have heard me tell of my children's introduction to the beheading of John. For all their childhoods, they joined me at the Canadian Opera Company's performances. From the age of three, my oldest had her own season tickets. Each year there was one opera I didn't take them to because it was too mature of a topic or the director had infused it with more violence than was appropriate. The year it was Salome was also the year they went to Opera Camp in the rehearsal building of the COC. Taking them through the door into the lobby, we were confronted by the head of John the Baptist in all its gore on display. Imagine if that were real and in the middle of a meal!

Jesus and all these followers have heard all of this and share the grief, the horror.

In their need for hope, the people gather, crowd around Jesus until there are 5 000 of them. But are there? Skip to the last thing we learn in this story: "those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children."

Is it surprising that only the men were counted? Not really, when you think that women weren't legally persons in Canada until 1929, the year that children under 14 were protected from working in mines.

Matthew at least mentions them -- Mark may not have included them in his earliest telling of the story, so the numbers recorded in scripture could have been grossly underestimated. 10 000, 15 000, 20 000 may have been more accurate.

They need Jesus. They don't want to leave Jesus. Jesus doesn't want them to leave. But this huge crowd becomes hungry.

And the people are fed. Whether you think that Jesus performed a supernatural act, or that, in an experience familiar to every worker at a church potluck, the food expanded to feed all gathered and more.

As opposed to Herod's feast of death and government of scarcity, in God's government, there is abundance. All are fed. In the government of God, everyone must be fed.

Jesus uses the disciples, even when they would rather look after themselves, to tend the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children.

Matthew depicts what happens when you move from a worldview of scarcity – “we have nothing here but five loaves and fishes” – to one of abundance – “thank you, God, for these five loaves and fishes.”

Jesus persistent, compassionate presence with the crowds teaches us that God is with us, and that our God is a God of healing the weak, a God of abundance. The contrast between God's government and Herod's couldn't be more stark.

The real wonder of this story is that it continues: God still cares deeply and passionately for those who are most vulnerable – the poor, the immigrant, the hungry – and God continues to use us to care for them.

A recent documentary about Woodstock on the public broadcasting network in the US got me to thinking about his moment in Jesus ministry.

Planners originally imagined 5000 and eventually planned for 15,000 to gather at Max Yasgur's dairy farm in Bethel, New York, 65 km southwest of Woodstock. Eventually 500,000 were estimated to have gathered -- young people from all over the continent for a weekend of music and of being who they were.

While there are memories of all the things that could have and did go wrong, this documentary focused on interviewing people who attended or were living in the surrounding communities.

With inadequate toilet facilities and all of the health issues that could go wrong, there was the probability that policing this event would be the most crucial.

But one young staffer changed the thinking of organizers and the focus shifted to looking after health and safety of the attenders.

It soon became clear that the provision of food was woefully inadequate. Lack of food became a crisis. Townspeople and farmers around got to work and started to produce food from their own larders.

As one farmer said,  
“they are children out there! We have to feed them!”

Which is actually the greater miracle: for Jesus to change those few loaves into an abundance of loaves, or for Jesus to change the hearts of the people there to teach them how to share?

The enduring relevance of this biblical story was lived out to the half-millionth degree at Woodstock. And it continues to be relevant to us today, as we are sent out by Jesus to gather food to feed the hungry.

This week Leslie and Paul Fagan celebrated fifty-one years of marriage. How did they celebrate? By sleeping in and having a leisurely brunch? No. They got up at 7.30am and headed to Costco to pick up 265 pounds of bread to take to our food bank at The Compass. Then they went out for breakfast!

When we give compassion freely, it ripples out far beyond our ability to explain or even imagine. Those streams of kindness and mercy that flow through us have an effect that only God knows

What have we learned?

We are graced by a God who has compassion, who suffers with us. Our God is a God of healing and abundant love.

We are called and sent to heal and feed the weak and hungry.

Which is actually the greater miracle: for Jesus to change those few loaves into an abundance of loaves, or for Jesus to change the hearts of the people there to teach them how to share?