

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

August is upon us now. That means summer is coming to an end, and our attention begins shifting to the fall, and especially to the new school year. All of us are thoroughly fed up with the pandemic by now, and there is a real desire to “get back to normal” – to get back to things as they were before this virus disrupted our lives. We want our kids back in school. We want to get back to work. We want to get back to our friends and our extended families, to sports, to movies, to concerts, to restaurants, and yes, to church. School is what is on peoples’ minds, though, and in the news. There is a real push to get schools opened up again for the sake of the economy. But at the same time, new cases of the pandemic have been soaring after states began reopening back at the end of May, and there is now wide recognition that we opened things up too quickly, and against the advice of experts. So there is a real concern that if we open in-person schooling before we have adequate testing and contact tracing – not to mention wide public buy-in to important measures like wearing face masks and physical distancing – that we will only be making things worse. Thankfully, our local school districts in Champaign and Urbana have recognized this danger and made the decision to stay online this fall. But there are many places throughout the country that seem determined to push ahead with in-person schooling, and that includes universities, our local flagship school included. The experts I’m paying attention to are expecting a sharp rise in cases in late September and early October because of school reopenings.

This desire to “get back to normal,” a desire I understand and empathize with, is our tie-in to the readings this morning – especially our gospel reading. This story of the feeding of the 5,000 is one of the more well-known episodes in Jesus ministry, and it is usually referred to as one of Jesus’ miracles – the amazing, supernatural things that Jesus can do but nobody else can. What struck me this time around in reading and studying this text, is how Matthew doesn’t talk about it in this way at all. He doesn’t tell us that “Jesus magically created loads of food for a huge crowd and isn’t that amazing?” His attention is focused elsewhere. I want to look at three things that Matthew does emphasize in this story that we might not notice when we’re focused on Jesus as a miracle worker, and then tie that back in to our current situation here at the beginning of August and the end of summer.

The first thing I want us to notice is that the earthly ministry of Jesus takes place in difficult and trying times. Our reading today begins with Jesus hearing the news of the murder of John the Baptist by King Herod. Jesus hears this news and he withdraws from where he is and goes to a deserted place. This is a stark reminder that God’s work in the world draws violent opposition from the powers that be. This is very important for us to realize because we live in a culture that too often equates God and country, as if they were always and automatically on the same side. It is too easy for us to ignore Jesus’ warning that those who follow him will be hated and opposed by those in power. And not only that, but it’s also easy for us to forget or ignore who this crowd was that Jesus and the disciples feed. These were not suburban soccer moms or urban elites. These were not the equivalent of our demographic in this congregation. These were those on the edges of society, the poor, the sick, the troubled in mind, body, and spirit. They would be the homeless and the working poor today. And one thing this global pandemic has raised in our consciousness is that lack of economic opportunity directly correlates with vulnerability to illnesses of all kinds. Life for this crowd was difficult and tenuous.

The second thing I want us to notice is that what draws Jesus to this crowd is compassion. Jesus doesn't go looking for this crowd. They come to find him because they are desperate. But when they show up, Jesus feels and empathizes with their desperation. The Greek word for compassion here is related to the word for intestines. In other words, it's something that hits you in the gut. This is Matthew's version of "God so loved the world." Jesus sees the plight of these people and he can't help but want to help them.

And then the third, and maybe most important thing I want us to notice in this text is the role the disciples play. I've already said that Matthew doesn't play up Jesus' supernatural power here, and he also doesn't make this just about Jesus and the crowd. In fact, you could argue that this story is really more about the disciples than it is about the crowd. So what do the disciples do? Not much, initially. They get interrupted from their retreat with Jesus. He spends all day healing the crowd. And then that's when they make their appearance. "Send them away," they tell Jesus. It's time for them to go and take care of *themselves* now. They should go find something to eat. Because that's how the world works, isn't it? I can help you to some extent. I can give you some of my time, some of my energy, maybe even some of my financial resources. But at the end of the day, you have to pull your own weight. It's this attitude that Jesus seems keen to challenge. "You give them something to eat," he tells them. "Impossible!" they object. "That's not how things work. We don't have the resources to feed so many people." But Jesus persists. He has them bring him the food they have brought along for themselves, blesses it, and has them distribute it. And lo and behold, it is enough – and more than enough, even.

How did that happen? I've heard two explanations. The first is the conventional view that I've already mentioned: Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes using his divine powers, just like God spoke in the creation story and the world came into being. The other explanation is that just like the disciples, many in the crowd had also brought along some food. I mean, you would, wouldn't you, if you were going to go chasing Jesus around the deserted countryside? So when the disciples started to share their food, the rest of the crowd shared theirs as well, and lo and behold it was enough, and more than enough. Both of these explanations are speculation, because Matthew doesn't tell us how this happened. Personally, I find the second explanation a little more interesting, and no less miraculous. But whatever the case may be, getting inherently selfish people to care about others and share their scarce resources is a tall order indeed, and it fits either explanation.

And that, I believe, is the takeaway for us from this text. This is what Jesus is still doing with those who would follow him in our time and place. I don't know how we will collectively as a society deal with the competing concerns this pandemic has created or exacerbated. Frankly, it looks a lot more impossible to me than feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. But I am also convinced that it is our calling as followers of Jesus to challenge our inherent selfishness, our instincts to grab what we can for ourselves, and to instead care for one another and the common good in the same way that the original disciples were called to go against their own fears and doubts to feed that crowd. It is of course a daunting task, and the odds seem very long. But God is in our midst in Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bless what resources we have and to move us to compassion and action for the world around us even and especially when our task seems impossible. May we trust that promise of God working in and through us for Jesus sake, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.