

Tuna on Wheat  
Sermon on Matthew 14:13-21 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, July 31, 2005

Clearly my mother had had it. She had spent the entire day at home with three children under age eight, and things had not gone well. As is often the case with those who testify before congressional committees, I have no recollection of the events of that day, but they must have been dramatic, and they must have been bad. Because the instant that my father got home from work, my mother marched my sisters and me to the driveway, said something in an unusually angry voice about “your children,” got into her car, and drove away quickly. Very quickly. Without looking back or particularly sorry. Dinner that evening must have been a hushed and rather somber affair.

My saintly mother, with her vast patience and limitless kindness, is not the only person who has needed to get away, by herself, in order to escape the pressing needs of other people. Jesus, too, for all his vast patience and limitless kindness, had those times when he needed to get away, to withdraw, to be by himself. Jesus needed to get away because there is a cost to caring. In the past several years, psychology has begun to recognize a phenomenon known as compassion fatigue, which is “a deep physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion accompanied by acute emotional pain”<sup>1</sup> that results from working closely with people who suffer. Those who experience compassion fatigue include: doctors, nurses, social workers, counselors, and clergy. Compassion fatigue results when someone continually gives care, kindness, and compassion to others without receiving the care, kindness, and compassion that he or she needs in return.

Perhaps Jesus was suffering from compassion fatigue when he got the awful news: his cousin, friend, and mentor in ministry, John the Baptist, had been executed by the king. That

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<sup>1</sup> From John-Henry Pfifferling, PhD, and Kay Gilley, MS, “Overcoming Compassion Fatigue,” at <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/20000400/39over.html>, the website of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

news, on top of Jesus' demanding schedule of teaching, preaching, healing, and casting out demons proved to be too much. Jesus withdrew to a deserted place by himself (Mt. 14:13a). Some scholars<sup>2</sup> think Jesus retreated out of fear, while others<sup>3</sup> argue his was a tactical withdrawal in response to indications of official hostility. I think Jesus was simply exhausted by the pressures of being a teacher, preacher, healer, and worker of miracles, and simply wanted to get away to seek solitude and quiet. Like us, Jesus needed time away from the expectant and ever-present crowds in order to be renewed, refreshed, and revitalized in his relationship with God.

Jesus never made it to that quiet and solitary place, because "when the crowds heard [that he was trying to get away], they followed him on foot from the towns" (Mt. 14:13b). I can sympathize, at least to a degree. I'm ready to leave the office, only to have the phone ring. Or it's been a long meeting and I'm ready to go home, when someone wants to stay and talk. The therapists among us would say that I need to recognize my tiredness and set appropriate boundaries. Jesus doesn't recognize those boundaries, because "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick" (Mt. 14:14). Not how I would have responded, I must admit. I would have been furious, and exasperated. Can't you call me when I get back? Haven't you tried the emergency room or checked with your doctor?

Tom Wright correctly notes that Jesus' reaction "is not anger or frustration, but compassion."<sup>4</sup> The sorrow Jesus experiences either over his own tiredness or over John the Baptist's death he translates into sorrow for the people and their plight. And so, in love and compassion for the people, Jesus heals the sick. "Before the outward and visible work of power, healing the sick, comes the inward and invisible work of power, in which Jesus transforms his

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<sup>2</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* vol. 2, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 485.

<sup>3</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downer's Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Chapters 1-15* (London: SPCK Press, 2002), 185.

own feelings into love for those in need.”<sup>5</sup> In spite of his own grief, his own exhaustion, his own desire to withdraw from the crowds, Jesus remains where he is needed, exercising his ministry of healing and compassion.

The crowd must have been enthralled with Jesus and amazed at the cures he was bringing about, for the people stayed all day long. “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’” (Mt. 14:15). Thank goodness for the disciples, who look at their watches, and mindful of Jesus’ hectic schedules and the people’s need to eat, suggest that everybody call it a day. Why not send the crowds back home, or at least to the villages nearby where they can buy some food? It is a suggestion “rooted in common sense and perhaps even compassion.”<sup>6</sup>

“Your suggestion is duly noted and appreciated,” Jesus says. “But I have a different idea. Instead of sending them away for takeout, *you* give them something to eat.” The disciples must have been taken aback, but after quickly regrouping and taking inventory of stock on hand, they report that they “have nothing here but five loaves of bread and two fish” (Mt. 14:17)—hardly enough to make tuna on wheat.

And that’s where the miracle begins. We’ve got nothing but a little bread and some fish. We’re only a small congregation. Our missions budget is so small. They’re a bunch of rascally teenagers. I’m just a housewife. I’m only one person. I’m no good at sharing my faith. We look around and take stock, and we seem to come up short. What gifts we have don’t appear to get us very far.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Davies and Allison, 487.

But Jesus doesn't say, "OK, well, thanks anyway. It's the thought that counts. Better luck next time." Jesus does say, "Bring the bread and fish to me." And then, "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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full" (Mt. 14:19b-21). The miracle happens when ordinary people who can't see anything but some meager bread and a couple of fish bring their gifts to Jesus. Jesus then takes ordinary bread and fish, and looking to God, offers a blessing, then breaks the bread and begins to give it away. And what started as something small and insignificant—just bread, only fish, nothing here but lunch—becomes great and significant and abundant and life-giving.

There are all kinds of explanations of the miracle of the feeding of the multitude: Some say the "miracle" was that everyone shared what they had, others say that Jesus got by on pretty skimpy portions and so could feed a lot of folks. Some people argue that the Bible has inflated the numbers, and others point out that Jesus gave out pieces of bread the size we give you when you come to communion, and that in fact what he was doing was creating a symbolic meal that foreshadowed the heavenly banquet. All of these explanations miss the point by demanding that there be some rational explanation for what is in fact a mysterious event.

The mystery of the miracle of the feeding of the multitude is the same mystery that shapes our lives, the mystery of God's abundant grace. I don't know how God does it, but I know that God does it: God takes our gifts, our talents, our lives—as small and insignificant as they may seem to us—and he blesses them and multiplies them, and he uses them to meet the needs of a world hungry for the word, for the bread of life. In Jesus, the bread of heaven, God satisfies that hunger and meets our every need. It all began with tuna on wheat.

