

“You Are Enough”
August 6, 2023
Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

This story in Jesus’ life begins with bad news. Jesus has just been told about the execution of John the Baptist. We don’t really know what their relationship was. Luke’s gospel says they are cousins through their mothers, but none of the other gospels makes that claim. It’s possible Jesus was a disciple of John’s. He was part of the throng who were baptized in the Jordan by him. And in this gospel, Matthew, he doesn’t start his ministry until he hears about John’s arrest. So, there seems to be a certain respect that Jesus has for John. The news of John’s death is painful.

I think that’s why Jesus withdraws to a “lonely place” for a while. I don’t think he’s going into hiding for fear that he’ll be next; I think he just wants to be alone to pray and to grieve. But it’s not to be.

The people follow him. They somehow figure out where he is and start clamoring for his help. And Jesus, rather than shooing them away, can’t help but have compassion on them. What happens next is a story that’s found in all four gospels, which is rare. The feeding of the crowds is the only miracle story told in all four. Now, this story is full of symbolism. Everything about it has been analyzed and pondered for centuries by people more intelligent and creative than I am. For instance, many believe the number of loaves and fish isn’t accidental; five loaves and two fish add up to seven, which is the symbol of perfection in the biblical world. When it’s all over they gather twelve baskets of scraps, which supposedly represents the twelve Tribes of Israel, making this a re-enactment of the Israelites’ trek through the desert when they were fed manna from heaven.

All of that may have been intended by the writer but it’s never stated openly. Other people have focused more on the mechanism Jesus uses to accomplish the feeding of so many. There’s a very popular theory that says what actually happened was when the people saw Jesus take all the food the disciples had and give it away, they were inspired to reach into their own pockets and purses and give away all the food they had brought with them. It’s sort of a “Stone Soup” scenario, which is a great story and speaks to the infectiousness of generosity and cooperation.

I think modern people like to tame stories like this. We want to frame it in a way that makes sense to us. I really don’t think the gospel writers understood it that way, though. For them this event may have been a sort of enacted parable. It pointed those around Jesus to the superabundance of God’s kingdom. It carried echoes of Isaiah’s words, calling the people to join a great feast where they’ll find all they want to eat and drink “without money and without price.” The dream of abundance and an end to hunger and hardship lies deep in our tradition. Words like these in Isaiah, and stories like this one in Matthew, speak to audiences that know a lot about hunger. Our ancestors understood firsthand what it means to struggle for your daily bread. So, the promise of a time when everyone would have all they want and more would have been an image of paradise for them.

In Isaiah we find God inviting the returning exiles to enter the kingdom of heaven, to join a feast set just for them no matter how little they have to pay for it. I especially love the line, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” In other words, we have resources available but we squander them on things that don’t really matter. Think of all the energy that goes into protecting our possessions, our status, our self-image. God tells the people as they return to their home they must give up those pursuits to follow a higher calling. God wants to make them something great in the world. God wants to make them a beacon for the nations to run to. They’re not meant to become some kind of fortress or a fearsome adversary; they’re meant to be the embodiment of God’s presence in the world so nations they’ve never heard of will run to them.

I think this story of Jesus feeding the multitude is steeped in this image from Isaiah. And underlying both is an assumption most commentators I’ve read tend to overlook. In all four versions of the story, the details are mostly the same, including the exchange that occurs between the disciples and Jesus. After he’s been with the crowd all day and it’s getting pretty late, the disciples come to him to advise him to send the crowd away. I think they do this because they’re a little nervous about what a hungry crowd of people might do to them. It’s a smart precaution. When you have a bunch of hungry people gathered around you, looking to you for food, telling them to fend for themselves is risky but not a bad idea. But Jesus’ response is curious.

He tells them, “You give them something to eat.” Say what, now? Is he teasing them? I don’t think he is. I think he’s serious. One theme that runs through the gospels, at least through Matthew, Mark and Luke, is Jesus deflecting responsibility away from himself and to his followers. Earlier in the gospel he sends them out on their own to carry his message to the villages and towns in the countryside. At other times he tells them outright, “You are the light of the world; you are the salt of the earth.” Over and over Jesus insists to his disciples, “You are enough.” He sees in them qualities they cannot see in themselves.

God has the same attitude toward the Israelites. God sees in them the capacity to carry God’s image to the world. We get hung up so often on the ways God is portrayed as disappointed with Israel, the ways they fail to follow Torah. But that disappointment has nothing to do with their inherent nature. They are not damaged goods. And neither are we. God sees in them, and sees in us, the potential to embody God’s presence in the world, because we are enough.

Our mistake is to allow our doubts and our fears to define us. We let them limit our actions toward others and we project them onto those around us and deny the ability of others. When Jesus tells his disciples, “You give them something to eat,” he’s talking to us, when we look to the heavens for solutions to our problems. You may notice their first reaction to the crowds getting a little restless is to get rid of them. But Jesus tells them, “No, bring them closer. Have them sit together. Create a community.” When we disperse from one another we only add to our division and limit ourselves. When we move closer to one another and become a community, anything is possible; all the limits are gone.

That’s what Isaiah’s words convey to the people returning from exile. If they can gather together, if they can sit down to a feast together, they can create a new future, become a new

people. In the same way Jesus' disciples are shown what can happen when community is created, when we open ourselves to abundance instead of giving in to fear. There's no magic involved in that. We're not being told to be something we aren't. We're being encouraged to embrace who we really are. We're created for community, not division. We're meant for generosity, not grasping. And we carry within ourselves the capacity to live with compassion and reveal God's kingdom if we're willing to claim it. Jesus doesn't tell us to be more than we are but to be fully who we are because we are enough. We are enough to carry God's kingdom in the world.

Amen