

## Hands-On Compassion

### Matthew 14:13-21

It is easy to be distracted by some scripture passages. This is one of them. Jesus did not feed just 5,000. He probably fed around 10,000. According to verse 21 he fed 5,000 men. There were also women and children present who ate. And Jesus did it with just five loaves and two fish. Here's where we get distracted. How, in God's name, did he do that? So little food and so many people. The scope of the miracle is staggering. How did he do it? Well, actually he did it in God's name. Verse 19 tells us he looked up to heaven and then blessed and broke the loaves.

Yes, this was truly miraculous, but the real message here is not the feeding of the 5,000 plus. The real message is found around the edges of the miracle.

First, take note of Jesus' emotions that day. Matthew 14:1-12 recounts the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod. The disciples buried John and then went and told Jesus. Jesus' immediate reaction was to withdraw from people. He needed to grieve. But the crowds followed him. They also were hurting, diseased, and crippled, in body and in spirit. Jesus did not retreat further away from them, nor did he tell them to leave. Verse 14 says he had "compassion for them."

Interesting word, compassion. We confuse it with empathy and sympathy, but it is very different. Empathy and sympathy are fairly synonymous. Webster's says they are the "capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings or interests of another." To be empathetic is to say to someone, "I feel your pain and I'm sorry." Jesus was not just empathetic or sympathetic to the crowds. He had compassion for them. Webster's defines compassion as "sympathetic consciousness of other's distress *together with action to alleviate it*. [emphasis mine]. Jesus acted on his sympathy for the masses by compassionately healing their sick. He did something! Going back to Jesus' emotional state over the death of John the Baptist, he deliberately set himself aside to tend to the needs of others.

Second, it is evening. Thousands are sitting on the hillsides. The disciples come to the Master urging him to send them away so they can go find food. At this point, in verse 16, Jesus says what I hold to be the most profoundly important words of this story. "They need not go away; *you give them something to eat* [emphasis mine]. Jesus was telling the disciples to also be compassionate, to act when they saw a need. Jesus knew they couldn't suddenly feed 10,000 people. Yet he said the words. They weren't meant for just that moment. He intended for the disciples to abide by the words for the rest of their lives. You give them something to eat. You live your lives of faith openly. You tend to the poor and lame. You work to relieve suffering wherever you see it. The words were not just for the disciples. They are also for us. What else is Jesus saying? That when we act compassionately toward those in need, then Christ works through us. He multiplied the loaves and fish; the disciples distributed the food, and I believe they did so with smiles and kind words for the people.

You give them something to eat. Tony Campolo is a sociologist, preacher, university professor, and writer. Many years ago he was speaking at a youth rally in Philadelphia. He talked about going into the world and bringing Christ to others. By the time he was done, youth were clapping and cheering. Campolo quieted them down and said, "Do you really want to do something to make a difference?" A resounding "Yes" chorused back at him. Campolo told them he would come back in three months and gave them the date and time. "You come then, and we will go and take Christ to others." They cheered.

Three months later, Campolo returned. A fraction of the original crowd was there. He talked to them and again they cheered. "Are you ready to take Christ to others?" he asked. "Yes," they enthusiastically yelled. "All right then," he said, "everybody out and into the buses." And they did.

Excitement ran high inside each bus. But several minutes later reality set in as the youth looked out the windows. The buses were heading into the Philadelphia projects, the tenements, the poorest part of the city. As they drove deeper into the slums, they began passing buildings with broken windows and

graffiti sprayed on the walls. By now, each bus was deathly quiet with wide-eyed youth. This is not what they envisioned, but this is what they saw.

The buses stopped. Campolo boarded each bus in turn and said to the youth, "I want you to get off the bus and break up. I don't want more than two people in any one group. Be back here in two hours. Now go and give them Christ."

The youth debarked and slowly drifted off in all directions. One 17-year old boy walked off alone. Walking down a street he saw a small neighborhood store. Typically for the area, it had iron bars on the windows and door. Just a little further, while passing a tenement building, he heard a baby crying inside. He walked slowly up the steps and entered a dimly lit hallway. The crying was coming from the floor above. With trepidation he climbed the stairs, walked down the dingy hallway, and followed the sound of the baby's crying to a door. He stopped and gently knocked. The door partially opened. A woman in a shift with a cigarette dangling from her lips stood there holding a naked, crying baby in one arm. "What do you want?" she challenged. Hesitatingly he said, "Ma'am, I'd like to tell you about Jesus." "Well, I'm not interested," she replied and slammed the door. The boy backed up a step, hung his head down, then reached out and knocked again. "Why are you still here?" she yelled. "Please, Ma'am," he said, "I don't mean to intrude. I just want to share the good news of Jesus with you. I won't take much of your time, I promise." "You aren't going to take any of my time," she snorted through the wisps of smoke from her lips. Again, the door slammed in his face.

Dejected, the boy went outside and sat on the curb. He said to himself, "What kind of a Christian am I? I can't even share Christ with anyone." He looked up and saw the little store he had passed earlier. Walking to it, he entered. The boy remembered two things – the baby was naked and the woman was smoking. He bought a box of diapers and two packs of cigarettes. Returning to the tenement and the door on the second floor, he knocked. When the door opened a bit he didn't say anything, but thrust the items through the door. The woman took them, paused, and swung the door open. He went in and the two sat and looked at each other. "Well," she sneered, "go ahead. Tell me about Jesus."

The boy told the woman everything he knew about Jesus in two minutes. Then he looked at the baby sitting on the floor. He had never changed a diaper in his life, but this day he managed to put a diaper on this woman's baby. He had never smoked a cigarette in his life either, but somehow he choked down a third of one with the woman. Then she began to tell him about her life in the projects as a single mother, having been abandoned by the baby's father. Tears filled her eyes. She talked for over an hour. He just listened.

Remembering about time, he looked at his watch, and told her he was sorry, but he had to leave. As they both stood, she quietly asked him, "Before you go, would you pray for me and my baby that we can get out of this horrible place and have a decent life?" The boy had also never prayed out loud with anyone, but this day he prayed. As he did, the woman gently laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed. He clasped his arm around her shoulders. As he left she said, "Thank you!"

Exiting the building, the boy made his way back to the waiting buses. A few minutes later Tony Campolo boarded the bus and said, "Well, gang, did you take Christ to them?" The boy stood up and had tears streaming down his face. "Dr. Campolo," he said, "not only did I take Christ to someone, but today I also met Christ."

That's what it's all about. Taking Christ to the world is less about words and much more about doing. It's called hands-on compassion. It is what Jesus told us do. "You give them something to eat," he said. When we do, we also receive as much as we give, sometimes even more. I would call that a miracle. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale community United Methodist Church, 7 August 2011