

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - August 23, 2020 - Compassion
Mark 6:53-56 and Matthew 14:14-21**

When we read scripture, we are not meant to view these passages as individual, stand alone accounts. Instead, we are to recognize that they are part of the greater narrative of Jesus' life. So while our second lesson today begins at verse 14, I invite you to press forward just one verse where we find that "When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns."

In other words, there was an earlier event that precipitated Jesus' desire for privacy and solitude. And in the preamble to our passage this morning, we encounter a disheartening and grisly scene. Herod, a ruler known for his cruel, self-serving, and fiercely protective nature is in the midst of a grand feast. With the festivities in full swing, he grotesquely orders that the head of a prisoner named John the Baptist be delivered to him on a plate. The request is promptly granted in all of its gore and in the presence of the partygoers.

"When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew privately to a solitary place." Having been informed of the very public consequences associated with serving the Kingdom of God, and in mourning following the execution of his cousin

and spiritual mentor, Jesus retreats for a time of intentional prayer and solemn reflection. And there, he remembers the life and ministry of John the Baptist.

Still, Jesus does not remain in solitude for long. Everywhere that he travels, word spread quickly until large crowds of admirers arrive on the scene. Jesus and his disciples have now sailed far from the chaos of Herod's scheming, and at his new destination he is warmly welcomed by a great multitude who have gathered on the shoreline.

Many of these admirers are broken people, evidenced by their need for healing. Yet, despite his own grief, and concerned for his own, personal safety in the days following John's death, Jesus finds it in his heart to have compassion on these strangers. He touches them. He heals their sick. He ministers in love. And as the hours pass, Jesus engages with them both individually and collectively.

When evening comes, the disciples attempt to serve as his handlers. They know that he is tired. They know that he is grieving. They know that he needs something to eat. So they encourage him to dismiss the crowds. To send them back

to the villages. For these people, too, are hungry and tired. And in the villages they can purchase something to eat.

Friends, have you ever had so many demands upon your time that it seemed as though you had no time to rest? Perhaps, not even time to eat. Because the questions kept coming and the needs were so great. There are times, aren't there, when we have put our own desires to the side to give of ourselves in ways that we did not think were possible? We do this often as parents, as friends, as professionals.

Sometimes, we have pushed ourselves so hard that we have no choice but to take a break and care for ourselves. But, other times, we somehow find a way to carry on, even in the midst of incredible challenges, seeking to balance professional and personal obligations in the age of COVID.

In our second lesson, the disciples have Jesus' best interest at heart when they encourage him to bring this engagement to an end and tactfully dismiss the crowd. But, Jesus rebuffs with a call to action and a claim that the day's work has not yet come to full fruition. Recalling the imagery of Psalm 23, where the shepherd leads

the sheep to green pastures, Jesus orders the crowds to sit down on the grass. And, then, turning to the disciples, he says, “you give them something to eat.”

Friends, the implication for us is very clear. It doesn't matter if we only have five loaves of bread and two fish - the meager offerings of a peasant diet. And it doesn't matter if the crowd numbers into the tens of thousands, we are to “give them something to eat.” For while the needs of our neighbors will always be greater than our perceived ability to provide, we are the ones who work in partnership with the God made known in Jesus and through whom we joyfully proclaim that “all things are possible.”

The chapter began with Herod's palatial feast presented in all of its opulence, cruelty, and violence. And now, in a dramatic reversal, Jesus presents a vision of his own, shared meal. There are no chairs or tables. No silverware. No place settings. Young and old, rich and poor, are all invited to recline on the grass and to share in the simple and inclusive fare of an itinerant preacher.

The imagery is striking and the message is powerful. Jesus and his disciples provide more than enough to meet the moment. And in it, they embody Jesus' prayer

to “give us this day our daily bread” rather than requesting the full allotment of bread for all of our days at once.

Like the great multitude who welcomed Jesus at the shoreline, many of us are broken people. We are concerned about our health. Anxious about our employment. Worried about our future. COVID-19 has changed us, and it has reshaped our communities. Anxiety, depression, and suicidal are on the rise.¹ Now, more than ever, our neighbors need to hear a good word of compassion, of friendship, of solitude. Of healing, of wholeness, of peace.

And that is where we, as people of faith, are encouraged to let our light shine. To prepare a place. To spread the feast of God’s love. To light a candle of hope. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/health/Covid-mental-health-anxiety.html>