

Story #1

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Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. 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. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 14:13-21

Over the past week I've been following two stories with similar contours but dissimilar outcomes. The first story is the one we've just heard, the feeding of the 5000, the only miracle story of Jesus found in all four gospels. Some of the four accounts add unique features. John, for instance, shows us the miracle taking place on a hilltop. But in all four gospels, thousands have come to Jesus, and at the end of the day they were all hungry.

The second story I've been following this week also includes a hilltop and many thousands of hungry people. The hill on which this story is still unfolding is Capitol Hill, in Washington DC, where our Congress and President have so far failed to agree on how much bread is available, and to whom it should be given, and on what basis.

At stake in particular this week has been the \$600-a-week benefit that began in late March, called the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation. This past Wednesday, Republican Senator Rob Portman of Ohio said, *"If we do nothing because we end up in a partisan gridlock here ... the people who get hurt are the workers because the \$600 will end. There's a cliff, and we can't let that happen so we need to do something before Friday."*

In Story #1, as told in all four gospels, Jesus sees a need and responds with authority and with a miracle that none will ever forget. We often overlook the fact that in this story there is no pre-screening. It doesn't matter if you had already brought your own picnic basket or were foolish not to think ahead. It doesn't matter if you're a member of the altar guild or a registered sex offender. It doesn't matter if you liked the sermon or not. Everyone gets some. Matthew tells us, *"All ate and were filled."*

We don't yet know how Story #2 will turn out. We do know there's been no miracle for the hungry. Nothing happened on Capitol Hill by Friday. The federal unemployment benefit was not extended. One news outlet said the week on the Hill mainly featured *'dueling speeches and procedural shenanigans.'* One proposed Senate bill would cut the federal unemployment benefits from \$600-a-week to \$200, but adds nearly 2 billion dollars for a new FBI center in Washington DC and 30 billion for Pentagon projects. The bread may, after all, not go to the hungry but to those with the best lobbyists or the most partisan constituencies. Less bread; more pork.

Story #1, the feeding of the 5000, is so non-controversial and uplifting. Why would I soil it by dragging in Story #2, so highly charged and political. I suppose the reason is, in part, that Story #1, today's gospel, is just one revelatory scene in what should be Story #1 in our lives. Whether here or anywhere else in all of the gospels, Jesus characteristically meets people where they are and addresses human needs and desperation wherever and whenever he sees it. As I understand it, Jesus expects the same from you and me – that we both see and address the needs and desperation around us in our time and place.

With this in mind, it's important to consider what was driving Jesus. The gospel makes it clear: When he saw the "*great crowd ... he had compassion for them and healed their sick.*" This same compassion later moves Jesus to feed them, and to feed them all. The entire passage conveys how Jesus consistently responded to human needs.

This compassion of Jesus was also meant by him to reveal to us the very nature of God. The theologian Marcus Borg once proposed that, "*For Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God.*" [Borg, Marcus; Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, p. 461]

You may still rightly wonder why it's necessary to examine this compassion of Jesus anywhere near our present and toxic national dilemmas. I suppose one reason might be that the compassion so fundamental to Jesus and his divine identity and mission was also to have been a guiding national characteristic for the ancient people of Israel. Consider just one text from the Book of Deuteronomy in the Law of Moses: "*[Thus says the Lord:] If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought ... and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land. "* (Deut. 15:7-11; NRSV) In later centuries, the prophets railed against Israel's infidelity to this vision of compassion. Amos, for instance, excoriates those who "*trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way.*" [Amos 2:7]

With these things in mind and heart, you and I must consider if and how our God calls us to compassion, and to actions that arise from that divine compassion, not only with regard to the hunger of our immediate neighbors but also with regard to the character and priorities of our own society and nation in our own time.

As we weigh all of this, and our place in it, and our responses, one pivotal moment in today's gospel may particularly hit home. It's a moment with two contrasting motives and voices. I recognize – and perhaps you will as well – how both voices cut to the chase with regard to our faith, our ethics and our citizenship. I recognize – and perhaps you will as well – how these two voices vie for my allegiance, how often I am torn between the two.

The first voice is the united voice of the disciples. Overwhelmed by the size of the throng and the collective hunger, they vote as a united caucus when they say, "*Send them away. Let them find their own bread.*" The second voice is that of Jesus, the Author of Compassion. He says, "*They need not go away. You give them something to eat.*" Amen.