

# ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

## NEW YORK CITY

### **COMPASSION: THE POWER OF GIVING**

**Matthew 14:13-21**

**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 3, 2008**

The importance of this outstanding miracle of feeding the great crowd of 5000, is that it is mentioned in all four Gospels (see Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15), so it must have made a tremendous impact on those who were present. However, each Gospel contains different emphases. Mark is the closest to Matthew. Luke says that Jesus used the occasion to teach the people about the kingdom of God (Luke 9:11), which he had commissioned the disciples to do themselves in the passage immediately before this. John's version is the most independent and detailed. He says that the miracle was performed before the Jewish Passover (John 6:4), and he follows his account with Jesus' discourse on the bread of life. John's points are obvious! Jesus is the new Moses who feeds his people with spiritual food, and if they eat it, they will live forever. John's account ends with Peter's double testimony: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 4:68-69).

**The Two Great Events:** However, we want to learn what Matthew is teaching through this incident. The first lesson is stated clearly: Jesus cares about people, especially those who are poor or suffering: "*When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick*" (Matthew 14:14). There is more to this than just the mere fact of Jesus' compassion. Matthew makes some of his best points by the way he links incidents together, and if he is doing that here, we can hardly overlook the contrast between the party King Herod threw on his birthday for his friends and the party Jesus throws in the wilderness for the crowds. The party of King Herod ended with beheading of John the Baptist, and the party of the Christ ended with the feeding of those who had no food. We can explain this contrast: Herod cared for no one but himself, his actions were determined by his lust for power and a desire to save face before his friends. Jesus cared for other people and took time to heal, teach, and feed them, even though His first desire was to be alone with His disciples and teach them.

Although Jesus was denied the rest He sought by taking a boat trip to the north end of the lake. There He found a large congregation to greet Him. He was not annoyed at being prevented from accomplishing His purpose of seeking rest. He was moved with compassion and embraced the opportunity of teaching the multitude and healing the sick among them. Few of us ever learn the art of adjusting one's self to what breaks our plans and to turning disappointment to do good. The heart of Jesus was ever ready to show sympathy to the manifold needs of the people. In His perfect grace, He was ready to show the fullest consideration to everyone.

The first clear lesson of this story, therefore, is that Jesus cares for you, even though most of the other people in the world. Your coworkers probably do not care a great deal about you. Even your friends are more interested in themselves and their problems than about you and your problems. So why do you spend so much time worrying about what others think and so little time bringing your cares to Jesus?

Are we weak and heavy-laden,  
Cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Savior, still our refuge;  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
In his arms he'll take and shield thee;  
Thou wilt find a solace there.

*Joseph Scriven*

When we bring our problems to Jesus, we bring them to one who not only cares about us and is compassionate but who understands us and is able to help us in our need. Peter wrote: "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (I Peter 5:7).

**We Cannot Do This!** "When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying: "This is a deserted place and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." But Jesus said to them: "They do not need to go away. **You** give them something to eat." And they said to Him: "We have here only five loaves and two fish" (Matthew 14:15-17). The disciples were continually suggesting this easy solution to any problem that arose. When little children

were brought to the Lord, the disciples said: “Take them away.” When a town refused to receive the Master with open arms, the disciples were eager to blot it off the face of the earth with fire called down from heaven. When the Master spoke of His coming crucifixion, the disciples said: “This be far from Thee.” So here they suggest to the Lord, “Send them away.”

In spiritual matters we can do nothing apart from Jesus Christ. Jesus said it himself in John 15:5: “If a man remain in Me and I in him he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” In one way or another each of the Gospels indicates that Jesus pressed this point on the disciples. Jesus initiates the lesson by asking Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” (John 6:5). The next words explain, “He asked this only to test him, for He already had in mind what He was going to do” (John 6:6). The story continues by showing how Philip assessed the situation from a human perspective, replying, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite” (John 6:7). It is after this that Andrew brings forward the boy with the “five small barley loaves and two fish” (John 6:9), which Jesus then uses for the miracle of the feeding. The disciples are placing emphasis on the poor quality of the bread, only barley bread, and the smallness both of the loaves and the fish.

What seems to have struck out most clearly in the mind of Matthew is that Jesus told the disciples to do something to improve the situation. He said: **“You give them something to eat” (Matthew 14:16)**. The emphasis does not come across as forcefully in the English translation as it does in Greek. In Greek there is the added and usually unnecessary pronoun **you**. The emphasis seems to have been, “You, you do it; why do you come to me?” Since Jesus knew the nature of the problem and was already aware of what He was going to do, the only reason He said what He did was to impress on the disciples that they could do nothing by themselves.

What a lesson for us to learn! We tend to think that we can do at least something and that at worst all we really need is some specialized help from Jesus. When we reflect on our “nothing” it is really nothing and not a little something. Always remember, you do have what God has first given to us, and although we can do nothing of spiritual value with it by ourselves, we will find that it is useful and sufficient if we place it in Jesus’ hands. That is what happened here, the disciples could do nothing, but they had five small loaves and two fish, and when they gave them to Jesus, they found that they

were all that was necessary. God had given you something that can be used effectively if you place it in Jesus' hands.

**The Sufficiency of Jesus Christ Working Through Us:** In this story Jesus meets the needs of the crowds abundantly. He took the five loaves of bread and two fish, directed the people to sit down, and then prepared for the feeding of the five thousand. God works through people just like you and me to bring about miracles. Although Jesus alone is sufficient for the human need, He nevertheless chooses to work through us as channels by which He meets that need. In this case He worked through the disciples, who were given the broken loaves and fish, distributed them to the people.

As Jesus looks at our world today, He turns to us, His disciples, and says, "You give them something to eat." Jesus tells you to give them something to eat, not just so that the hungry can be fed; Jesus turns to you so that you may know His compassion and be filled with the joy of being a blessing to others. The secret to our success is the same as the disciples with only five loaves and two fish, it seems so small, but the Lord asks that we, "Bring them to me." What we possess may not be much, but in His hands it is all-sufficient, for He is our God, the Creator and Miracle-Worker, and we are to place it in His blessed hands for a multitudinous sufficiency. As we attempt the work of God, it will surprise us what resources are placed at our disposal and what help is provided from heaven.

In this respect, the distribution of the food by the disciples to the five thousand people of the story becomes an illustration of what Jesus was doing when He sent them to preach among the cities of Galilee, as recorded in Matthew chapter 10, or what He will do at the end of the Gospel when He declares: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:18-20). We are to be the distributors of that blessing.

Christ is the Bread of life to a perishing world, and as the Living bread, must be passed on to others by the eaters themselves. The myriads around the world in their sin and indifference need not depart. In Christ, there is sufficient for everyone. As Christ used what the lad gave Him and the disciples passed on the multiplied bread Christ gave them, so through our

surrendered lives, Christ waits to make others the sharers of our knowledge and experience of His all-sufficiency.