

“More than a Picnic”

Introduction: Summer is a great time for a picnic, is it not? Fill a cooler full of your favorite food and beverages, grab a blanket, maybe a frisbee, and find a spot of grass in a park or a place at the beach and relax and enjoy.

Before us in Matthew’s gospel this summer day is the well-known text of Jesus feeding the five thousand. At first glance it might seem like a large, lovely picnic was taking place on a Sunday afternoon, but there was actually more going on. As we hear the text this morning, keep your ear out for the compassion of Jesus and the identity of Jesus. Both become further revealed as he continues to train his twelve apprentices to carry on his ministry, learning to trust that while they will never have enough, he will never run out. [READ]

I. Compassion

A. The text begins: “When Jesus heard what had happened . . .” What had he heard? What had happened? Well, it was not good news! His cousin, and ministry colleague, John the Baptist, had just gotten beheaded by the wicked king Herod as Herod and his cronies were having a birthday bash! Understandably, Jesus needed some quiet time away, a place to grieve and some space to pray. It’s a natural reaction when someone we care about has died. But Jesus didn’t get much alone time for when the crowds heard the news they set off after him.

B. Mark, Luke, and John all depict the crowd as chasing Jesus down because of the miracles they had seen. But, could it also be that they sought him out in order to accompany him in his grief? They didn’t have much to give Jesus but they could give him their presence, they could just “sit” compassionately with him. And then note how quickly Jesus turned his emotions away from himself and toward that crowd, having compassion on them and even healing some of those who were sick?

C. And could it also be that the disciples, at the end of the day, were not trying to chase the crowd away? Instead, having seen the compassion of the crowd at the beginning of the day toward Jesus, and then the compassion of Jesus toward the crowd throughout that day, maybe they wanted to get in on this compassion thing and were genuinely concerned that, in an area without delivery boys or food trucks, the people would go hungry. So they suggested that they be dismissed to find something to eat before it got too late and the shops in the nearby villages all closed down for the night.

There was more than just a picnic going on. There was real, live, tangible concern. There was genuine compassion being offered on many levels for those in need. Compassion is kind of contagious, isn’t it? When we catch a glimpse of what Jesus is about, it draws us in. We want a piece of it somehow, we want to participate as best as we are able.

II. Training in Trust

A. As it turns out, Jesus definitely wanted his disciples to participate, and thought dinner for the crowd to be a good idea. But he had in mind a provision that would go far beyond what the disciples had asked or imagined! Jesus liked their compassionate desire to make sure the multitude was fed, but he wanted them to do the feeding, and with only five loaves of bread and a couple of fish! Impossible!! What he really was asking them to do was to give him what they had and then trust him to do the rest.

B. Now there are those who would argue that the miracle here was not one of production, but one of sharing. That is, what Jesus did when he made everyone sit down and held up what little the disciples had come up with, was move others to produce food they had brought but kept hidden because they didn't really want to share it. If we'd just be willing to not be so greedy, the world would be a better place, it is concluded.

C. Well, true, but I think there was more going on here. There was Jesus calling his disciples to take part in his ministry of providing for the world's needs – whether it is providing food for the hungry, housing for the homeless, advocating for justice, caring for creation, or inviting people into the family of God – realizing they did not have enough on their own to do so, and trusting and learning that God's resources are inexhaustible and will never run out.

III. Identity

A. This picnic also looks back and then forward, bringing into greater focus the identity of Jesus.

1. The look back is from Exodus 16 and God's provision of manna, a bread-like substance, to sustain his people as they traveled through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt but the journey to the PL was not an easy one. The people grew hungry and began to grumble. "Can God really spread a table in the wilderness?" the psalmist records them wondering (Ps. 78:19). Indeed, God could as he proceeded to rain down bread from heaven, fresh each day, to meet their needs. Could Jesus be leading a new kind of exodus for God's people, this time from the slavery of sin and death, sustaining them/us on that journey?

3. The look forward is a picture known as the Messianic Banquet. As the prophet Isaiah explains:

On this mountain, the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain, he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever . . . In that day they will say, "This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (Isa. 25:6-9).

This is a picture of God's new creation. It is a feast, a time of restored fellowship with God and one another, that no one, as the leftovers indicate, will have to leave. Death is on the menu but the host, God's Messiah, not the guests, will swallow it up.

This celebration is in stark contrast to the one King Herod threw for himself, a celebration of the kingdom of this world. The guest list was the top 2%, a real who's who of government officials, military commanders and the leading citizens of Galilee. Herod, we see, welcomed the in-crowd and shunned the poor. He is motivated by pride and enslaved by his ego. His party ended in death. By contrast, the picnic Jesus threw in the wilderness welcomed all, from the poor to the tax-collectors to the sinners. He is motivated by compassion and humility. His party ends in life.

As we enjoy an afternoon picnic, we are really living out in a small but tangible way what we'll one day enjoy forever. And we do the same at the table he now has spread for us by giving up his flesh. Let us go there together.