

Unrestricted Compassion

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
August 2, 2026 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
Text: Matthew 14:13-21

Today's Scripture text is a familiar one, for sure – the “Feeding of the Five Thousand.” This is probably the most familiar of Jesus' miracle stories and one of only two miracle stories to appear in all four Gospels. I confess this is one of my favorite Jesus stories for lots of reasons, and I also confess that I usually prefer to preach on the version of this story which appears in John's Gospel. I like John's version because it explains where the five loaves and two fish at the heart of the miracle came from. John tells us that they came from a little boy in attendance who wanted to share his lunch. What's not to love about *that*? But, I admit that after sitting with Matthew's version for a week, it's growing on me.

For one thing, Matthew's story, along with the versions in Mark and Luke, provide us with important context for this event. In these versions, this happens immediately after the disciples bring word to Jesus that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been beheaded by Herod and John's head presented to Herodias in appreciation for her dance for Herod on his birthday. Herodias in turn gave the head to her mother. This is no doubt why Jesus, upon hearing this horrendous news, sets out to find a secluded place where he could just be alone in his grief. But the crowds following soon found him and the stage is set for the miraculous meal.

The text is clear about what Jesus does next. It says, “he had compassion for them (the crowd) and cured their sick.” In other words, Matthew is telling us Jesus waded right into the crowd and began curing folks, and we can imagine touching and praying with as many as he could, *individually*. John sets this scene very differently, emphasizing that Jesus was already sitting on a hillside with the disciples around him when he saw a large crowd approaching on foot. John also explains that Jesus took them to be a crowd of pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover in the holy city. So in John this crowd of pilgrims recognizes Jesus and seem to settle in on the hillside to see if Jesus will talk to them, and apparently he does. This one story depicted so differently in two different Gospels is quite remarkable because it reveals to us how even the people who knew Jesus remembered this one central event so very differently. Matthew shows us a Jesus whose compassion and love for the people is so strong that, in the

midst of his own grief, his own exhaustion, he wades into a crowd of people who need him. He healed and he talked and he prayed with the people as he encountered them. This is the person of Jesus, the human Jesus, interacting with real people, meeting them in the moment they're in.

John on the other hand depicts a much more divine appearing Jesus. For John, Jesus was the great teacher, the sanctifier and redeemer, the great bridge between God in heaven and God's people on earth. John depicts Jesus, even in this story, talking and teaching certainly, but seemingly keeping his distance from the people. In John's version of this story, Jesus was in the midst of his disciples, but at a distance from the people. The point at which these two different versions of the same event converge is at that moment when Jesus realizes the people are hungry. It's been a long day for everyone and they are in the middle of nowhere. The crowd – whether they're being cured and prayed with as in Matthew, or talked at as in John – at this point the people on that hillside are hungry and tired and Jesus knows it. So, this is the point, in both versions when Jesus is about to make this hungry crowd a teachable moment for the disciples.

In Matthew, the disciples come to Jesus at the end of the day and tell him he needs to send the people on their way so they can find food for themselves before while it is still light. Instead, Jesus says to them, "they need not go away. You give them something to eat." Understandably, the disciples are astonished by this response and remind Jesus they have no supplies on hand to do this. All they have is two fish and five loaves of bread. No way can this crowd be fed with so little. Jesus does not acknowledge their negativity. Instead he calmly instructs them to have the people sit down. Then he takes the fish and bread, lifts them to heaven and asks God to bless them and then hands them over to the disciples to give out to the people. Right here, the math doesn't work. Even if you hand the two fish and five loaves out to the 12 disciples, that's only 7 disciples involved in distributing the food. There's still 5 disciples unaccounted for. This, I now realize is the point at which the miracle begins to become visible to the disciples. Somehow there is still fish and bread to give to the 5 remaining disciples. And, as instructed, they give the food to the people and they had more than enough. So much, in fact, that the disciples then had to find baskets to gather up all the leftovers, twelve baskets full (one for each disciple, if you're paying attention.) Math continues to play a central role in the story, as it is reported out that the number of people who were fed

totaled “about 5000 men.” Women and children were not included in that count – no surprise there, but that’s a different sermon. 😊

In John’s version, there are a number of noteworthy differences from Matthew’s version. 1) The crowd is not coming out specifically to find Jesus; they are pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem who just happen to run into Jesus and the disciples; 2) Jesus, realizing these pilgrims would be tired and hungry, asks the disciple Philip specifically where they could buy bread to feed these people; 3) Philip tells Jesus it would cost six months’ wages minimum to buy enough bread for all these people and that was money they just didn’t have, even if they wanted to feed these people (an idea Philip was clearly not keen on); 4) Another disciple, Andrew then approaches to say he has two fish and five loaves a little boy was willing to share. This is when Jesus, at least according to John, gives very detailed and specific instructions about how the people are to be broken into groups and then asked to sit down. This is where John notes the crowd as about 5000 people in size. After they are seated, Jesus blesses the bread and fish the distribution begins. Again, there is more than enough food for everyone. Again, Jesus instructs the disciples to pick up the leftovers and there was enough to fill 12 baskets. Again, one basket per disciple. John’s story ends with Jesus deciding to rush off because the crowd was “about to seize him and make him king.” An odd ending, really. It feels almost contrived, like John couldn’t figure out how to end the story. But, that’s John for you. Always dramatic and a bit wordy...

So what are we to make of this most famous of Jesus’ miracle stories told so differently. The miracle part of both versions of the story is clear enough – As Jesus blessed the fish and loaves, something miraculous happened so that there was enough food to feed everyone there, with leftovers besides. That is definitely what the miracle looked like, in a tangible sense. Not enough food suddenly became enough food as it was distributed among the people. A simple explanation for this part of the miracle is obvious – some of the people in the crowd had food with them and, inspired by Jesus’ blessing, they shared what they had. I can totally see that happening. The thing is, I’m not convinced that is the real miracle here. No, to me the real miracle is what I’m calling “Unrestricted Compassion.” Now what do I mean by that? Well, in that moment Jesus created by deciding not to do the easy thing and send the people off to fend for themselves for food, he demonstrated for the disciples and the people, that

everyone deserved compassion that was sometimes not an easy thing to provide. Unrestricted compassion. In other words, Jesus wasn't bound by the judgements the disciples seemed to be struggling with as they looked at this crowd. He wasn't thinking the people should have had enough foresight to bring enough food with them, whether they were just following him as Matthew describes, or on their way to Jerusalem as John describes. Jesus didn't see them as short-sighted or foolish, as desperate for whatever he had to offer, or just curious to see what would happen. Jesus just saw them as people – people in need of something very basic, enough nourishment to continue on. Whether that was real food or spiritual food or most likely both, Jesus immediately knew what the crowd needed and he wanted the disciples to see beyond their own annoyance to see it too. He knew the disciples needed to first see, then respect and finally to the difficult, if not impossible, in order to meet that need. This is unrestricted compassion. It is compassion offered to someone with absolutely no strings attached, without worrying whether the person is worthy of compassion, without filtering this compassion through our own narrow perspectives.

Dear ones, on this Communion Sunday as we gather around Jesus' own Table, we are receiving Jesus' love and compassion given freely to each of us without judgement of whether or not we deserve it, whether or not we are hungry enough, whether or not all the pieces are precisely in place for this sacred meal to even happen. The Jesus Table – this Communion feast for body and soul to which Jesus himself invites us – is the embodiment of unrestricted compassion for each of us because none of us, not one of us, is perfect. We all fall short of what God imagines for us because that is just the nature of being human. As Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, we are quick to judge others even as we are slow to recognize the plank that keeps us from seeing the reality of God's people right in front of us. In these days when a senseless war feels unending, when greed feels overwhelming, threatening to consume everything in its path, when Canada is on fire and climate issues are wreaking havoc around the world – we need to embrace each other with the same unrestricted compassion Jesus gives us. We need to love the other as we love ourselves, showing God that we do strive to be who God needs us to be – the people who love God with all that we are and all that we have so that we are able to love our way through this mess consuming our world. Will it be easy? No, of course not. But, consider this – have you ever feed 5000 people at one time? Jesus did. With the disciples' help. And that's where we come in. Amen.