

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

This is an amazing story. There are very few stories that make it into all four gospels. Jesus' birth is not in all four. Jesus' transfiguration is not in all four. Jesus walking on the water is not in all four. But this story is. That alone should make our eyebrows go up and make us pay attention to it a little bit more.

It begins, at least for us today, with the phrase, "Now when Jesus heard this . . ." but since we jumped in in the middle of a chapter, skipping thirteen verses from last Sunday to this one to be exact, we don't know what he just heard, so let's figure that out first.

In Matthew 14, verses one through twelve, we have the disturbing story of the death of John the Baptizer, Jesus' cousin. He's been imprisoned by Herod. Herod knows John is popular and recognizes that perhaps he really is spiritually gifted – so he

knows he should be cautious, but John has also spoken out against Herod and his family. You see, Herod's current wife, Herodias, . . . had until recently . . . been his sister-in-law. Now, Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the great. She had married her half-uncle Herod II, but then she left him to be with Herod Antipas, Herod II's half-brother. Herod Antipas had also been married before Herodias came along. And Herodias had a daughter with Herod II who was Herod Antipas' niece but is now his stepdaughter. Everybody confused yet?

Long story short, John was calling Herod out for the family drama, saying, "you shouldn't be married to your great niece/sister-in-law" and it was embarrassing to all the people named Herod or Herodias.

So, John is beheaded in prison after a scene that sounds like something out of Jeffrey Epstein's island - Herodias' daughter dancing before a room full of powerful and wealthy men and her creepy new step-dad promising her anything she wants – even John's head on a silver platter.

And John's disciples discover the tragedy. And they bury his body. And they go and tell Jesus, and that, friends, is what is meant in verse thirteen when it says, "Now when Jesus heard this . . ."

His cousin - gone. His hype-man, his prophet, and what I would believe to be his childhood friend – gone.

So, Jesus is grieving. And he gets into a boat to be alone for a little while. No one on earth could fault him for that.

But he isn't alone for long. His disciples are on land, walking along to keep his boat in their sight, and crowds are gathering around them on the shoreline. Dozens turn into hundreds and hundreds turn into thousands. And they wander into a deserted area between villages when the bow of the boat turns toward shore and Jesus steps out.

And despite the heartache he feels about the events that have been happening recently, through eyes that were still wet with tears, he looks on the people with

compassion. He does not keep his distance but walks among people like us, meeting their eyes, reaching out his hand, healing broken places within them.

And as the sun begins to set, when the practical needs arise and the logical thing to do is to have dinner and lie down to sleep, the disciples suggest that he dismiss the people so that they can find their own food and shelter.

It is practical and responsible. It's absolutely appropriate, and I imagine the disciples are also tired and hungry themselves.

But Jesus replies, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

What? How? But it's not a suggestion. It's not a gentle invitation. It's a command. One that makes no sense.

The disciples look around at the sea of people and do the math immediately. They count heads. They count loaves, and the numbers don't add up.

They respond the way any of us would: "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

Nothing here. Nothing enough. Nothing worth mentioning.

But Jesus doesn't argue with their math. He simply refuses to be governed by it. Because mathematics in the Kingdom of Heaven aren't like mathematics on earth.

To paraphrase Frederick Buechner, Jesus' math, the gospel's math, is illogical, absurd arithmetic. *We* do our math based on Arabic numerals, universal operations, logic, and economics. For example, to *give* means to subtract from our resources. The disciples did the math and knew that, in a deserted place, more than 5000 people could not have dinner unless they found loaves for sale in villages and towns nearby. There was no such thing as DoorDash or Uber Eats back then, and what the disciples had – namely the five loaves and two fish – was *their* dinner, and they were hungry.

But when the world says, "you have to take care of yourself first. To give is to subtract," Jesus says, "No. To give is to multiply."

When the world says, “you don’t have enough to take care of others,” Jesus says, “Don’t *ever* tell me you don’t have enough. Bring whatever you have and let me use it.”

When the world says, “Send the needy people away from my sight. Let them rely on food stamps and food pantries and shelters for the unhoused.” Jesus says, “They need not go away; you take care of them.”

You know . . . there are things about this passage that sound familiar . . . Jonnycake and RICAN and Pantry on the Lane and the Pawcatuck Neighborhood Center have thousands of clients. Over 5000 men, women, and children if you add them up. Individually, I can’t feed that many people. I’ve got three growing kids to take care of at home! Almost 13% of Rhode Island residents are on food assistance. I am just one person. I don’t have enough.

So, Jesus, send the crowds away. Let them go to the dollar store or Aldis. Maybe some millionaires will make big donations to the non-profits that will really make an impact to their budget. Maybe Stop and Shop, and Walmart, and the Big Y will give even more almost expired food to the food banks. I just can’t do anything myself. Let the people take care of themselves as best they can. Send them away, Jesus. I have nothing here but a few dollars.

But Jesus’ math is different. Jesus’ math is not rational or practical or based on the economics of this world. He has miraculous powers. He feeds thousands that day. But friends, the miracle really begins to unfold *not* when Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes, but when the disciples surrender their scarcity—when they hand over the small, insufficient amount they’ve been protecting.

Because the gospel breaks the math of this world.

Frederick Buechner wrote in his book [*Wishful Thinking*](#): “Greed is the mathematical truism that the more you get, the more you have. The opposite of greed – the selfless love of God and neighbor – is based on the truth that the more you give

away in love, the more you are.” The more life you have. The more love you have, and the closer heaven is to earth.

Jesus is demonstrating that in the kingdom of God giving does not mean subtraction. It means multiplication - in excess. The disciples ate that night. And so did the crowd, and so did Jesus, and so too will we. Amen.