

August 6, 2017, 9th Sunday after Pentecost

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Focus: Jesus feeds us.

“Now, when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”

That’s how our story begins. So why did Jesus go off by himself? Well, right before this, he has just heard that his cousin John the Baptist has died and was buried. This story finds Jesus in a low place, a place where he just wants time to be by himself. Maybe we can relate. Maybe it was to mourn his cousin or maybe he was afraid that he would be next, but whatever the case, it’s clear that he doesn’t get his break. Like a mom trying to get one moment’s rest from the kids, *within the very same verse*, the crowds follow him on foot. So he’s Jesus: he has compassion on them and heals some of them. Now can he get some time alone? No chance. Next it’s the disciples pointing out that it’s getting late, and the crowds—and probably they themselves—are hungry. So Jesus, please just send them away, so that they can buy something to eat. And Jesus says to them, “you give them something to eat!” But the disciples cannot even be bothered to do that by themselves. And so after he hears that they have five loaves and two fishes, he says, **“Bring them here to me.”**

“Bring them here to me,” and with those words, the miracle begins. We have probably all heard the story of the loaves and fishes before. But I think the true miracle of this story is really what it says about who Jesus is.

Jesus who’s tired, who’s grieving, who simply wants time alone, but who keeps on going. Jesus in this story never gets a moment’s rest. He doesn’t get his day off. He never stops working.

What drives him in this story is not a desire to prove himself. He’s already done that. It’s not a desire to attract crowds or, in present day terms, to fill the pews. In fact, it’s clear he’s been trying to get away from those crowds. It’s really simple. Jesus loves the people. Our story says that he has compassion on them. This compassion, this love for the people, this is at his essence, who Jesus is.

And so this love says, “Bring them here to me.” These words were said on the lakeshore all those years ago, and Jesus says them still to us today.

Bring them here to me. Bring to me your loaves and your fishes. Bring to me all the best that you have to offer and the “nothing” that you think you have to offer. Bring to me your children and your elderly. Bring to me your greatest successes and your most heartbreaking failures. Bring to me your food grown straight from your garden and your food stamps begging a meal. Bring to me your hopes and bring to me your fears. Bring to me your money and your tithes and bring to me your poor and your huddled masses. Bring to me your baby’s first steps and bring to me your final days in a hospital room. Bring to me your love for your spouse and bring to me your hatred for your enemy. Bring them here to me, and I won’t shame you for having so little to offer. Bring them here to me, and I’ll never make you feel like a stranger in the crowd. Bring them here to me, and I will heal what is hurting you. Bring them here to me because here in this church, here in my house, you will never be sent away. Here in this place, you will be filled. That is the promise to us made in this story.

It does not matter how long we have known Jesus. It does not matter whether we think he has more pressing problems or not. It doesn't matter whether we haven't spoken to him in years or whether we have Jesus on speed dial and keep nagging him with every one of our little hungers. It doesn't matter whether we come to him the first thing we do in the Sunday morning, or whether it's in the middle of a Friday night when we can't sleep. **No matter who you are, or what you have to offer, or what you are carrying, Jesus says to you, "Bring them here to me."**

The disciples in our story see the crowd as a problem that needs to be fixed or sent away. Maybe you know people like this, or maybe when we're not careful, we treat others like this. The difference is Jesus sees them as people. And Jesus sees us, too. He sees the care-worn faces. He sees our injuries and our scars. He sees our dirtied hands. He sees the last little scraps we have to offer. And he takes those scraps to himself. If you ever feel unworthy, know that he will never turn you away. "Bring them here to me."

"Bring them here to me," because we don't have enough to feed ourselves. We may be able to earn a living to put food on our table. We may even be able to get through life's ups-and-downs by putting on a tough face, grinning, and bearing it. But life after death? Lasting hope for no matter what comes? We can't make that.

Jesus can. Jesus takes what you have, even if you think it's nothing. Even if you think all you have are leftovers too little to do anything with, even if you are ashamed to give it to him, and he works miracles. That's what this story is about. "Bring them here to me," because I can take what you have and feed you. And not only you, I can take what you have and feed people you may not even know with what you give me. Whatever we have: gifts to share or problems to bear, Jesus can take them and work miracles that feed us and our neighbors with his life.

We see this every week in Holy Communion. Every week, one person on the altar guild is responsible for providing bread and a bit of wine, and Jesus takes it, and feeds everyone who comes here, no longer with bread and wine but with his body and blood given for the world. Those little pieces of bread? That wine tucked away in the fridge? Bring them here to me. Your best friend in the church? Bring them here to me. The spouse or family member you've been arguing with all week? Bring them here to me. The person in this church that you try to avoid all Sunday morning? Bring them here to me. And all those people: your neighbors, the people who come to your food pantry, the people you might not even think or care to invite? Bring them here to me. Bring them here to **this rail**. Because at this place, I will feed you with myself. At this place, no one is turned away. At this place, no one goes away hungry. At this place, you come as you are, and you leave **filled** with my love, my hope, my Spirit, my precious body and blood. "Bring them here to me," and I will work miracles. Bring them here because I have compassion for them. I love them. And when you give them something to eat, the God who multiplied the dreadful cross into Easter Sunday promises that it will be more than enough. Bring them here because at this table, you are healed. At this table, you are fed. At this table, you find that we are all part of the same crowd. And at this table, the body of Christ is taken, blessed, and broken for us.

What happens at this table seems simple enough. Bread and wine are shared. But when we understand who has brought us here, it becomes something more. It becomes a model for the church. We find our entire mission is living out what we taste and see in Holy Communion. We

find an evangelism that doesn't invite only the best, that doesn't judge visitors to the church, to our food pantry, or to emergency aid visits, but simply does as Jesus says, and "brings them here to me." We find a stewardship campaign that doesn't focus on how to meet the budget with the "nothing but" we think we have, but trusts that our tithes, "when we bring them to him," can be multiplied for our mission. We find that when we are ill or dying or grieving in hurt, when we "bring ourselves and our worries to him," we find friends, fellow disciples on the road, and Christ himself whose healing is deeper than any medicine. When we are fearful about our lives or about our future or about the church, our fears, when we "bring them here to him," are swallowed up in the hope of his resurrection life. When we offer our time, our possessions, our selves, "bringing them here to him," we find that we are sent out into the world, no longer as just ourselves, but as the body of Jesus risen still teaching, healing, and feeding the crowds.

We don't have to look two thousand years ago at loaves and fishes on a lakeshore to find a miracle story. We see it here every week. Every week, at this table, Jesus brings us together to himself to feed us and heal us, so that we may go out to bring healing and the bread of life to a hurting and hungry world. **Amen.**