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“You Give Them Something to Eat”

Based on Matthew 14: 13-21 and

Great Ends of the Church: Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World

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Looking back on it, it's a little surprising that it was so surprising. After all, we'd seen Jesus heal countless people. We'd seen him cast out demons. We'd heard him proclaim the good news about the kingdom of heaven. He'd attracted this huge group of followers, not only the Twelve but a really committed group of disciples. And then there were the thousands of other followers. We'd seen Jesus do so much, inspire so much, it really shouldn't have come as a surprise. But it did.

It was a hot day. Such a hot day. We had just learned that Jesus' cousin John, known as John the Baptist, had been beheaded. We knew he had been arrested by Herod a while back but had hoped that he would be set free. But that was not to be. And when Jesus heard that John had been executed, he wanted some time alone and withdrew from us, and more importantly, from all the crowds that had been following him around. I should say, he *tried* to withdraw. He got in a boat and looked for a deserted place to retreat, to pray, to mediate, but by then, Jesus had already become so well-known, there was nothing he could do, nowhere he could go without crowds following him. We disciples knew that he was trying to get away, trying to have a time of solitude and we talked about whether or not we should follow him, too. Some of us thought that we should honor his desire to be alone. Some thought that it would be best to follow him, to act as a buffer between him and the crowds. In the end, we decided to go. I think secretly—even those arguing that we should let him be—I think secretly we all wanted to follow him just as much as the crowds. And those arguing that we should follow to protect him from the crowds, might not have had Jesus' best interest at heart as much as they tried to convince themselves that they did. But I'm glad we did go.

Jesus went out in the boat looking for a private place but the crowd followed along on the shore, trying to anticipate where he would land so they could be there when he did. Trying to be among the first to greet him when he came to shore. Trying to be among the first to be healed when he'd come to shore. And when Jesus saw this spectacle of thousands of people following along on the shore, Jesus didn't simply row out into the middle of the sea as I think I would have done, after all, at least that way he'd be away from the crowds. But I guess if he'd done that, he still would have been able to hear the noise of the crowds coming across the water. People were calling out to him, begging to be healed. Some were too sick or too exhausted to call out. Many were simply moaning in their discomfort from their various ailments. But the people possessed by demons were the worst. They were yelling and shouting. And a lot of what they were shouting wasn't very polite if you know what I mean. Anyway, I guess Jesus would have had to go pretty far out to have the peace and quiet he sought. Of course, Jesus is a better man than I (that probably goes without saying) and rather than simply rowing out as far as necessary to get away from the noisy, demanding crowds, instead he

had compassion on them and came back ashore and one by one, to give each person the attention they yearned for. One by one he cured the sick and cast out demons.

Honestly, I started to get a little tired of all these moaning, demanding people. I know it sounds terrible and I know that it's just the opposite of what Jesus was teaching us both in words and by example, but it's the truth. I was getting worn out by person after person coming up to Jesus and crying and complaining and expecting Jesus to make them better with no regard for his feelings. With no regard for his needs for rest and quiet and time alone. And of course, since I'm being honest I might as well say it. I guess I was a little tired of having to share Jesus with all these strangers.

Finally, when I thought I couldn't take one more single, "Heal me, Jesus of Nazareth" just when I thought if I heard one more demonic scream, I would start screaming back, finally someone came up with the idea to convince Jesus to send all the people away. We all knew that he would never send them away for his own sake so we decided to tell him that it was really for their own good. After all, we were out in the middle of nowhere and it was getting late. It was still really hot and people needed to get something to eat. People needed to get home.

So we went to Jesus and someone 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." We all agreed, trying to pretend this was all a very new and novel idea, and a good one. But Jesus said, "They need not go away." We started arguing with him, trying to convince him that these people wouldn't leave unless he sent them away and unless he sent them away they would starve but he was having none of it. He said, "you give them something to eat."

What?! How were *we* supposed to feed the thousands of people who were crowded around? This was met with a variety of reactions. Some just got quiet and confused. Some kept trying to convince Jesus that these people needed to take care of themselves. But some people, and I'm not going to name names, but some people got downright angry. We didn't sign up for this, did we?

Truth be told, we didn't really even have enough food for our group of disciples. We had two fish and five loaves that were going to have to last us quite awhile, until some rich man invited us to dinner. Looking out across the crowd one thing was for sure. There were no rich men inviting us to dinner tonight and as long as *these* people were hanging around, it could be *long* wait for that invitation. Surely we could reason with Jesus by explaining to him how little food we had. I said, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish," hoping Jesus would say, "oh really? Is that all we have? In that case, I'll send the crowds home." Of course, that was not what happened. Not by a long shot. Instead Jesus said, "Bring them here to me."

What did he mean by "them"? Bring *them* to me. At the time we thought he meant the bread and fish, so we handed them over, still thinking that when he saw how meager our supply was, maybe he'd send the crowds away. But as I've been thinking about it, now it seems that maybe he was talking about much more than food. Maybe he was talking about the crowds. Maybe he was talking about bringing people to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel...

But like I said, at the time, we thought he wanted us to bring him the fish and the bread and we did. And he took the bread and the fish and he looked up to heaven, just as we'd seen him do so many times before and so many times since, Jesus blessed and broke

the loaves and he gave them back to us to serve to the people. And he didn't have to explain. He didn't have to tell us again to feed the people. He didn't have to tell us that there would be plenty for everyone. Somehow in his blessing we just knew. Well, I guess I can't speak for the others, but as for me, I just knew. I had this wave of warmth and understanding that washed over me and I knew that somehow, these two little fish and five loaves of bread were going to feed the thousands of hungry people. And not only feed their physical hunger, but feed their spiritual hunger. I knew that no meal with Jesus would ever be the same. I knew that no meal with the disciples—no meal with these my new brothers and sisters—would ever be the same.

And of course that is what happened. We each took a piece of bread or some fish and we took it around to the crowds and people took what they needed and everyone ate and were filled. No one went hungry. And we even had plenty to spare. We had plenty of left over broken pieces to last us for days. Twelve baskets full.

The funny thing is, most of the people there that day didn't even know about this miracle. We knew. The disciples knew that we didn't have enough food. But the multitude, all they knew is that someone came around handing out food and they had plenty to eat. And I guess that's all they needed to know.

As much as Jesus taught us in words, he taught so much more in his actions. He could have sat us down and given us a nice lecture on what we were supposed to do as his followers. He could have told us that our job as his disciples is proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of Divine worship, the preservation of the Truth and the promotion of social righteousness. He could have told us that these things all weave together to as part of a beautiful tapestry: the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. But instead, in just a few actions, some seemingly little, some miraculous, he *showed* us these things. He showed us the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind not only in his teaching but in his actions. He showed us the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God in his compassion for the crowds and his relationships with all his followers from his closest friends and disciples to the strangers begging to be healed. He showed us maintenance of Divine worship in his prayer life and his blessing of the loaves and fishes. He showed us preservation of the truth in his very being. He showed us promotion of social righteousness in healing the sick and feeding the hungry. And he exhibited the kingdom of heaven to us and to the world in all his actions that day and every day.

And he did this with a great economy of words. Because he said so little, what he did say carries that much more weight. He gave us two commands that day. Two commands not only for us on that day but for all Jesus' followers throughout the ages. He said, "You give them something to eat." He said, "Bring them to me." And doesn't that just about say it all? Proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind; shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; maintenance of Divine worship; preservation of the truth; promotion of social righteousness; exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to us and to the world. You give them something to eat. Bring them to me.