

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 6, 2023

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## You give them...

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Motivation is important. It says a great deal about our values and beliefs. This is why exploring what motivates us is one of the most important aspects of mirror-work. Our motivations can also be a source of great misunderstanding and miscommunication; so we must tread carefully when interpreting motivations, both our own and others'.

What does this have to do with the feeding of the 5,000 that we read about in today's Gospel? Quite a bit! Many biblical commentaries view the feeding narratives in the Gospels as God's response to the "Bread and Circuses" of Rome. And if that is the case, then motivation becomes vitally important.

The motivation behind the "bread and circuses" of Rome was primarily about ensuring political support. Emperors used free food and the gladiatorial games to distract the populace from their suffering. The irony of this is that the general population of Rome was suffering because of the consolidation of wealth (agricultural land in particular) and power in the hands of an elite few.

Speaking of the elites, let's take a moment to examine the literary context of our Gospel text today. Chapter 9 opens with the narrative of the Death of John the Baptizer. King Herod throws himself a birthday party with his wealthy and powerful friends. Amidst the opulence of this setting, King Herod is manipulated into having John beheaded. The motivation here seems to be Herodias' (that's Herod's wife) anger that John denounced her marriage to King Herod. Feasting and power on display with some absolutely terrible motivations at work.

In the very next scene we find another sort of feast and another sort of power on display. However, the motivations involved in this feeding are drastically different than Herod's feast, or the Roman *cura annonae* ("grain dole"). And it

is this difference in motivation that we need to explore for what it says about the Way of Christ.

Not only is Jesus imitating the Roman “grain dole,” but he is also joining in a long line of miraculous feedings from the Hebrew traditions. Those feedings are often motivated by God claiming the power of abundance over and against the complaining of the Israelites. In this way many of these feedings boil down to trust in God. Manna and quail in the wilderness emphasize that all abundance comes from God and that we are to trust in God to provide for us.

That is yet another motivation for feeding the hungry, seeing it as an expression of trust in God’s providence. We can give away what we have to others because we trust that God will provide enough for us in the future. But that’s still not the primary motivation we see at work in the text for today. No, Christ’s motivation has nothing to do with maintaining power and control. It has nothing to do with distracting people from their plight. It doesn’t even have to do with teaching that God is the only source of abundance (though that is certainly not a negative motivation the way the others are). Christ’s motivation is made clear in Matthew 14:14, “When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had **compassion** for them and cured their sick.”

Christ’s primary motivation is **compassion**. He sees the needs of the crowds and he desires to meet and serve those needs. They are sick and in need of healing, so he heals them. They are hungry and in need of food, so he tells his disciples to feed them. Needs are met when the kingdom of God is near!

“Send the crowds away to find food” the disciples urge. “No, **you** feed them!” is Christ’s response. “But we have so little” the disciples respond. “God is the source of all abundance” Christ teaches. And what is the result of this exchange? Five thousand men and an untold number of women and children “ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.”<sup>1</sup> Christ’s compassion for the crowds is blessed with an overabundance of what is needed!

Have you heard of food deserts? These are places where it is difficult to acquire even basic food staples. My last call was right next to a food desert in rural Minnesota. The town of Atwater, MN and the countryside around it qualifies as a food desert. The irony being that there are farms all around that

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:20 (NRSVUE)

area where cattle are raised, milk and meat produced, and all sorts of vegetables and crops are grown.

Yet in the midst of all this food, the citizens of Atwater have access to a Dollar General and a gas station convenience store for food stuffs. Otherwise they need to travel 20-30 minutes to the nearest grocery store. This same plight is shared by many other rural communities, as well as many low-income urban communities too.

Given the model we have in Christ, how would compassion motivate us to act in response to this reality? If we are agents of God's Kingdom at work in the world, what should be our response to the existence of food deserts? Meet the needs of the hungry, right? Absolutely! But I think Christ invites us to go a bit deeper than that. Compassion compels us to go deeper.

If compassion truly is our motivation then we have more work to do than just feeding the hungry. If compassion is our motivation then we need to ask compassionate questions too. Questions like, "Why are people hungry?" Which is a dangerous question to ask! There's even a famous quote about that question from Archbishop Hélder Câmara (who served in Brazil from 1964-1985), "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."<sup>2</sup> Now we can see how compassion can get us into trouble!

Compassion motivates tough questions and invites tough conversations. Why are there food deserts? Because grocery stores in rural or low-income communities are not profitable enough. History shows that they can be profitable...just not profitable **enough** for some companies and CEOs. Another example comes from the world's current refugee crisis. Compassion would motivate us to ask the deeper and dangerous question: "Why are there so many refugees on our Southern Border?" Because of decades of resource extraction from, and political interference in, Central and South American countries by Western countries. We have to go deeper...we have to carefully explore motivations.

Granted, we don't see tough questions being asked in our reading today, but they are present in Matthew's Gospel (and the others).<sup>3</sup> This feeding narrative then provides us with yet another example of the Way of Christ. When people

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<sup>2</sup> Rocha, Z. (2000) *Helder, O dom: Uma vida que marcou OS rumos da igreja no Brasil*. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes.

<sup>3</sup> c.f. Matthew 6:24; 13:22; 23:14; John 9

are in need we are called to meet those needs, not convene a roundtable about investigating the situation. But once those needs are met, once the immediate suffering has been addressed, then we are called to ask tough questions, to have hard conversations. We cannot keep putting band aids on people without eventually looking for the cause of their suffering. This is the Way of Christ, the Way of compassion.

I am proud of the many kingdom serving ministries that St. Stephen is involved in. We do a lot of good work feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and welcoming the stranger. And I am proud that our motivation aligns with Christ's...we pursue these ministries out of compassion, not out of a desire for power or influence, or even a desire to be seen as "good." But full compassion requires some next steps...some tough questions and hard conversations. All of this is required if we are going to follow the Way...if we are going to hear Christ's command: "They need not go away; **you** give them something to eat." Amen.