

**“A Fishes-and-Loaves Approach to Life”**  
**Matthew 14:13-21**  
**August 6, 2017**  
**Central Texas Metropolitan Community Church**

There are any number of ways to approach life, some of them more effective than others. There is what I call a “watch-your-back approach” where some people see the world as a fearful place in which to live and respond accordingly with the paranoid obsession of protecting themselves from strangers and imagined intruders or attackers. And others who have lost all joy in life and see it as nothing more than something that must be endured may have a “defeatist approach,” characterized by a sense of hopelessness. There is the “dog-eat-dog approach” to life, where some people see life as a competition, leaving them with the attitude that everyone else is an opponent who must be outmaneuvered and conquered. And there is the “rose-colored-glasses approach,” in which people seem to deliberately ignore the pain and suffering in the world, while pretending that everything is just fine.

But there’s another approach to life found in this morning’s scripture reading: an approach I call a “fishes-and-loaves approach,” based on Jesus’ response to the sick and hungry crowds of people. So for the remaining time we have together, I want to talk a little bit about it.

As our reading opens up, we see Jesus recognizing his own personal needs and making an attempt to tend to them. His cousin, friend, and mentor, John the Baptist, had recently been murdered by King Herod – beheaded, in fact, for no other reason than to satisfy the whim of Herod’s wife and stepdaughter.

Jesus would have been devastated. His grief needed attention. And so he withdrew in a boat to a solitary desert wilderness all by himself. He didn’t withdraw because he was tired from serving others, but because he was an emotional mess.

And when Jesus looked up from the depths of his despair with tear-swollen eyes, he was greeted, not with comfort and assurance, as may have been his hope, but with crowds of people who had their own needs. While he had been attempting to sail away into the sunset, the sick and hungry crowds made their way along the shore desperate for some relief. You see, the very same Herod who had murdered his friend had also stolen money and crops from these peasant farmers and fishers in order to build up wealth for himself and his family. And out of his own emotional scarcity, Jesus saw them and had compassion.

And that’s what I think is the key to this morning’s text, as well as a “fishes-and-loaves approach” to life: compassion. This isn’t so much a story about a miraculous multiplication of a small amount of food into a large amount, but rather, it’s a story about compassion and what happens when we act on it.

“Compassion” literally means “suffering together.” Jesus was suffering emotionally, he saw the crowds suffering physically, and he suffered together with them. His suffering didn’t prevent him from relieving the pain and distress of others; it motivated him to relieve their suffering.

Too often, I think our own suffering prevents us from serving others. We become emotionally paralyzed and we withdraw from the world, when, if we adopted a “fishes-and-loaves” approach to life, instead, we would see the suffering of others through the lens of our own pain and we would feel compelled to do something about it.

It’s a radical approach, this “fishes-and-loaves” way of existence. It goes against everything we’ve been taught. In a world which insists that we meet our own needs before – and many times, instead of – the needs of others, attending to our own suffering by addressing the pain and suffering of other people is a revolutionary approach to life. But that’s who Jesus was. He was radical and revolutionary, meeting the needs of others out of his own spiritual and emotional scarcity.

But the story isn’t just about him. It’s also a story about his disciples, who were experiencing their own sense of scarcity. The way John’s Gospel tells the story, it was a young boy who provided the two fishes and five loaves of bread. But in this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples seem to already have the food in their possession. There were more than five thousand hungry people out there and there were only thirteen of them with nothing more than a small bit of food.

And in their scarcity mentality, they encouraged Jesus to “send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” They made it sound awful nice, as if they had the best interests of the crowds in mind. But it doesn’t take much effort to see they were hungry, they didn’t have much to offer, and they sure didn’t want to share it with anyone else.

And so it must have come as a shocking surprise for them to hear Jesus’ response: “You give them something to eat.” And in the end, that’s exactly what they did. They brought to Jesus their meager resources and then they fed the crowds, not only meeting the needs of the crowds, but also transforming their own sense of scarcity into one of abundance.

I believe Jesus was trying to impress upon his disciples a sense of compassion. Five loaves of bread and two fish wouldn’t have been enough to even feed the disciples and Jesus. They had their own problems. But in spite of those problems – or maybe because of them – Jesus insisted that they do the radical and revolutionary thing. While experiencing their own hunger pangs, he instructed them to join him in looking out and acknowledging the hunger of others – to suffer together with them, to have compassion. And they did. And because they did, they responded by feeding them what they had.

Troy Perry, the founder of MCC churches, has experienced a whole lot of suffering in his life. He was outed as a young gay man, causing him to be defrocked as a Pentecostal preacher. Later on, he attempted suicide after the break-up with his lover. And he witnessed plenty of police harassment of the LGBTQ community in his day. The final straw was when some good friends of his were arrested for committing lewd conduct, when in fact, they were doing nothing more than buying beer in a gay bar.

Troy’s emotional suffering could have led him down several paths, none of them beneficial to him, to others, or to God. But the one he chose was to serve others by answering God’s call to start a church for the LGBTQ community. It’s not in spite of his suffering, but because of it, that we worship here today. Troy’s was and still is a “fishes-and-loaves approach” to life, characterized by compassion. It’s a way of life that is less concerned with the outcome than with trust in God. His suffering compelled him to address the suffering of others.

God does not call us to retreat from the world, but to transform it. We may feel as if we are suffering, and we very well may be. But we aren’t the only ones. Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis points us to others who are suffering: “the poor in the US are of all races, all genders, all ages, and come from all over – urban and rural, citizen and immigrant. They are families who have no access to sanitation services and whose kids play in and near raw sewage. They are families who have lost their ancestral burial grounds and right to a livelihood because of mountaintop removal mining and extreme extraction. They are people who work two or three jobs but still find themselves homeless and poor. They are people who get locked up for fighting for fifteen dollars while the fast food corporations they work for make untold profits. They are the tens of thousands of families whose water has been cut off because they can’t afford to pay for water right near the largest freshwater lakes in the world. They are the 22 to 32 million people whose health care is threatened to be cut by politicians who have quality health care.”

And just as Jesus responded to the needs of the poor and the sick, even in the midst of his own scarcity; and just as the disciples learned to address the hunger of others, even in the midst of their own hunger; so too, we are invited to the revolutionary and radical “fishes-and-loaves approach” to life which addresses the pain and suffering of our neighbor. It goes against all instincts. But if we try it, we just might experience some relief in our own lives.

May each of us serve the world, rather than retreat from it. May we experience abundance as we serve our neighbor out of our own scarcity. And may God bless us as we seek to bless others. Amen.