

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

“...you give them something to eat.”

You can pretty clearly imagine this scene. And maybe not just because it's a story you've heard for most of your life, but maybe that helps. Here it is...Jesus, the disciples, and the crowds, all out in a deserted place together. Picnicking. There's no little boy like there is in John's story, but the loaves and fishes are there. The five thousand men are there. The women and children were there too. It comes across as quite the idyllic scene. And all were fed enough to be satisfied.

Because Jesus told his disciples to feed them.

But let's back up a bit, because I'm getting ahead of myself. Our passages in worship often start in the middle of the story. Sometimes we edit it a bit so as to not distract us from what is happening **in** the story, but today we stuck to the scripture as written and it's worth noting that this Gospel reading started with “Now when Jesus heard **this...**” which begs the question, “What was ‘this?’” And the answer matters.

What Jesus heard was that John the baptizer – his cousin, his forerunner, perhaps his teacher, and very likely a dear friend – has been killed. Matthew had just finished narrating what happened to John after being imprisoned by Herod Antipas. He didn't just die in prison, as perhaps Herod had intended. He was brutally and publicly killed because Herod didn't want to lose face at a banquet he was hosting. We can safely assume that he had gathered elements of the ruling class of Jerusalem together at a lavish feast – overflowing with food and alcohol – so that he could curry favors or cash in on favors. Everyone was there for the political and social dance that was the luxury of being in power in a Roman colony.

It was a banquet of excess with the powerful pretending to care about one another while looking for ways to improve their station. The feast ended

with John's head on a platter, and probably most of the attendees leaving unsatisfied with what they got out of the gathering.

This story that Jesus had just heard was centered in the power of the empire – brutal, selfish, and exclusive. And he went as far as possible from that center. He relocated himself to a wilderness, a locale where John had been when he was baptizing and prophesying about the Messiah, a place where Jesus had gone after he was baptized to resist the tempter.

Jesus excused himself from the games of the world and went somewhere else. And the crowd followed. The hungry, sick, and needy people of the margins eagerly fled the center to stay with Jesus. We've often attributed Jesus' move to the wilderness as an attempt to get away from the crowds, but what if Jesus was trying to get **them** away from Herod as well? Because as this crowd joined Jesus in the wilderness, they became the antithesis of what was happening in Herod's court. They became part of God's Empire that was so entirely different than the Roman Empire and its puppets.

In the Roman Empire, the ruling class, specifically the Emperor, was the source of all things. The favor of the Empire provided people with the bread they needed. Favor, partisan and exclusive as it was, met the needs of those who were needed, liked, or useful. At the expense of everybody else. At the expense of those who struggled to find stability in a place that didn't care one bit about them or what they needed.

They were forced to flee with Jesus – where they are welcomed, where they are healed, where they are fed. By Jesus, by the disciples. "You give them something to eat."

The contrast couldn't be clearer – even though we didn't hear the narration of Herod's banquet and only got my summary of a summary. This isn't just a miraculous story of abundance, it is a bold example of what it means to be part of this community, of the empire that God is bringing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

To borrow the words of a colleague, Pastor Micah Krey, “The miracle reveals what kind of king Jesus is.

Herod’s kingdom creates fear. Jesus’ kingdom creates abundance.

Herod silences a prophet. Jesus teaches and heals the crowds.

Herod’s feast ends with death. Jesus’ meal leaves everyone satisfied, with twelve baskets remaining.”

“You give them something to eat,” Jesus says. We don’t have to play Herod’s games. We don’t have to send them back into the world to struggle and beg for scraps from the ruling class’s tables. The people who gather around Jesus in that wilderness are fed because Jesus brings abundance. Jesus brings wholeness. Jesus brings a new kind of community to the world.

And we get to live in it too.

Jesus told the disciples that all would be fed and that they would do it. “You” in the Greek sentence structure is emphasized. It’s not just a supernatural miracle story of feeding; it’s a story about the way the kingdom works through the disciples – again in contrast to the power structures of the day.

Jesus acted with mercy. Jesus healed out of his compassion. Throughout Matthew’s story he does that – showing mercy to those who needed it. Not like Herod who has no thought at all of mercy. While Herod only dreams of power, Jesus is moved by compassion to be the bearer of God’s mercy in the flesh.

“You give them something to eat” is a command to us who have followed this path. Sometimes it’s literally about feeding. We gather monthly to provide food through FISH. We help provide a meal at Hope Dining Room. But it’s more than just actual food. It’s the mercy shown when we support the work of Hilltop Lutheran Center as they provide support to those most on the margins. It’s the mercy shown when we offer a warm place to sleep on the coldest nights. It’s the mercy shown when we welcome people into this community without question or judgment. We follow in the way of Jesus when

we work to welcome all into this community, especially those who have nothing to offer in return.

Herod's rule was one of death and power. It was built on currying favors to hoard power and resources. It was a game for the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and marginalized. It included banquets where the main course was fear and the capricious whim of the ruler.

God's reign is one of life and inclusion. It's never a question. "You give them something to eat." You love them. You welcome them. You come, because in feeding, we are fed. In gathering, we belong. In being merciful, we find mercy. **All** are satisfied. Thanks be to God. Amen.