

## **CONTAGIOUS COMPASSION**

**Scripture Readings:** Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

**Texts:** Psalm 17:15; Matthew 14:19-20

A few years ago, I attended the Interim Ministry Network Conference where Eric Law was one of the plenary speakers and he introduced us to his book, Holy Currencies. Law wants to expand our understanding about stewardship; it is not just about money but stewardship also includes leadership, relationship, truth, wellness, and time/place. He uses the word ‘currency’ intentionally; he wants us to think not only of physical money (currency) but to also think of currents like an electric current or currents in water. If a current doesn’t happen, then your light won’t turn on or the water will go stagnant; by extension, if the church community doesn’t keep money, leadership, relationships, truth, wellness, or time/place in circulation then the ministry of the community will stagnate.

One of the biggest obstacles to overcome in these holy currencies is the fear of scarcity. As long as we keep sharing all these aspects of church life, then God’s abundance will thrive. To help us understand this concept, Law gave two people each a stack of cards. He had each of them exchange a card with each other—an example of a closed circuit. Then he asked, “What happens when these two people start sharing their cards with other people, and those people share their cards with others?” Well, as you can imagine, all the people in the room were moving around trying to give away the cards they had received; there was animated conversation, motion, and laughter. The room was exactly as Law imagined: full of life, animation, and currents!

Now I thought, what a neat exercise; I’ve got to try this at home. So at the next officer retreat, we did the card exchange. Again, the room was full of motion, conversation, and laughter. When we debriefed the exercise, one of the church officers admitted that she started hoarding cards; she was just uncomfortable with giving everything away.

I think it is wonderful when we get those little teaching moments so we started talking about our fear of scarcity. We wondered what it is about our lives that leads us to believe that we won’t have enough or that we need more. In the course of the conversation, I remembered reading that a researcher had discovered that most people—no matter what their level of income—believe that if they just had 30% more income, they would be happy. The amazing thing about this study was the researcher went back to people years later when they were making 30% more than in

the original study, and guess what? They still believed that if they could make 30% more, they would be happy.

We seem to be driven to want more and that desire can blind us to what we do have and immerse in our fear of scarcity.

I think this human propensity toward a fear of scarcity is part of what drives the wonder of the feeding of the 5000+ (the gospel writer of Matthew is the only one who tells us that 5000 men along with an unnumbered group of women and children are present.) During Jesus' life and ministry, the feeding of the 5000+ is the only miracle story found in all four gospels. Because this miracle is told in all the gospels, various New Testament scholars have offered various speculations why this miracle would be the only one shared.

Feeding miracles are relatively common in Bible stories. In the Torah, the children of Israel receive manna from God during their journey through the wilderness. In 2 Kings, Elisha feeds 100 people with twenty barley loaves and a sack of grain and has leftovers to clean up. Some New Testaments scholars wonder if the story is simply a miracle story or if the story has been amplified from simple beginnings to become a symbolic understanding of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I think my favorite understanding is that the miracle is a feast of sharing where the disciples' initial offering of five loaves and 2 fish so inspires/shames the crowd that they also share what food they had hidden away because they were fearful of scarcity. This interpretation of the story is found in the Arch series of children's Bible stories using the gospel of John's account.

I like the idea of the feast of sharing because it means that the real miracle is not an increase in the amount of food, it is the change in attitude among the people—they end up not falling prey to their fear of scarcity, their hearts are moved to be more generous and compassionate.

This transformation helps us understand the reasons for the feast in the wilderness. According to the gospel writer of Matthew, Jesus has experienced two challenging events. First, he had been rejected by the people of his hometown. Second, he had received news that Herod had killed John the Baptizer. In the gospel of Matthew, John and Jesus have their most extensive conversation before Jesus' baptism and we get the impression that the two men had a relationship. So when Jesus hears that John has been murdered, he decides to withdraw into the wilderness. He begins that journey by boat.

When he and the disciples come ashore, a crowd is already there to greet them. In this dark hour, Jesus sees the crowd and feels compassion for them. The Greek word translated as compassion has its root, the inner organs that are offered at a sacrifice. When we say that a person feeling compassion means that s/he has their heart go out to the people, it is almost literal. Jesus so deeply feels for these people that he can heal them, something he could not do in Nazareth.

When evening comes, the disciples want Jesus to send the people away with the excuse that they need to eat. Jesus urges his disciples to feed the people to which the disciples say—and here’s where sometimes you want the gospel writer to tell us about the disciple’s words, are they being smug or sarcastic?—that they only have five loaves and two fish.

The gospel writer writes that Jesus takes the bread and fish, blesses them, and breaks them. Then he gives the food to the disciples to give to the people—and there is enough for everyone to be filled.

By breaking the bread and fish and giving it to the people, Jesus performs an act of total trust in God’s abundance. He does not succumb to the fear of scarcity, the currents of life flow through the crowd, and sacrament happens.

Gil Bailie associates the moment with what Jesus does at the Last Supper. He says that Jesus is telling us: ‘This is my life—here’s what you do with it; you give thanks to God, because it isn’t yours, in the first place; you break it; and you give it away for others.’<sup>1</sup>

Paul Nuechterlein takes Bailie’s statement and connects it with this feeding of the 5000+. It is a meal that highlights faith in God’s gift of abundant life. We trust God so much that even when our lives are broken, we can give them away because God is an eternal source of life! We can give our lives away because we know, that just as happened with Jesus, we will receive them back. The current is complete knowing that in giving away, we will continually receive back.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Neuchterlein, “GirardianLectionary.net,” Proper 13 A, July 10, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Neuchterlein.