

You Feed Them

Texts: Isaiah 55: 1-5; Dorothy Day, *Changing the World* (see *Bulletin*); Matthew 14: 13-21

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Back in 1986, Bruce Hornsby and the Range released their song, *The Way It Is*, a protest song about the way things are: homelessness, poverty, racism, and the resignation that simply accepts them. As the chorus says, people say, "That's just the way it is, some things'll never change, but don't you believe them."

Today's story about Jesus and the feeding of the more than five thousand is the Biblical equivalent of that song: Jesus' disciples see a problem, that people are hungry, and propose sending people off on their own to solve their hunger problem for themselves, and Jesus stops them short. He says, "No, don't just accept that that's the way it is. You solve the problem."

To fully understand what's going on here, we need to back up a bit. Our reading began with the words, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

What had he heard? He'd heard that his cousin, who happened to be John the Baptist, had been murdered by King Herod. Jesus withdrew because he was mourning his cousin's death, and probably thinking about his own death, for he surely knew that Herod wasn't going to stop with John.

Jesus just wanted to be alone, to grieve in peace. We all understand that. We all know what that's like. We just want to have time for our sorrow, a time for ourselves to work through the emotions that we're feeling.

But Jesus was a bit like a celebrity, and the crowds were like paparazzi and fans, and they find out where he is, out in this lonely, deserted place far from all the crowds, and they rush out there into the wilderness to find Jesus.

Some of them just want to see the famous Jesus, as people have always wanted to see famous people.

Others wanted to see how Jesus was taking John's death: was he scared, was he angry, was he in hiding now, was he going to seek revenge? What was Jesus going to do?

Still others were caught up in their own problems. The text says many sick people were brought out to Jesus. Their needs continued even as Jesus was grieving.

Jesus might have just yelled at them, told them to go away and leave him alone. His cousin had been murdered by the violent tyrant ruling the land, who also wanted Jesus' life. Couldn't they give him a moment's peace?

But Jesus didn't do that. He took his own sorrow and he used it to feel compassion for these others. They, too, were in a lonely, desolate place, just as he was.

In the story, the wilderness serves as a kind of real life metaphor for all of their lives: they have problems, and there's nothing there, no resources to help them. They are going through a barren patch of life. Jesus spent the day healing the sick that were brought to him.

Now, I think we can imagine ourselves there. We're disciples, and we've just watched Jesus put aside his own needs in order to think of others first, to help them. We want to be like Jesus. That's why we're his disciples, after all! So we start to look at the needs of others.

And so we start to think ahead a bit. It's late afternoon, we're out here in the middle of nowhere, and we're getting hungry. Probably the crowds are getting hungry, too. Jesus should send them away to the towns to get some food before the darkness falls.

Feeling proud of our thoughtfulness, we head towards Jesus and give him our suggestion: It's getting late, this is a deserted place, you should send the crowds off to a town somewhere to buy food for themselves before nightfall.

A good, sensible, thoughtful suggestion. We do this all the time. O God, please help those people. Stop racism. End hunger. Prevent violence against women. Comfort the lonely. Do any of a million things that would make human life better.

And Jesus is very grateful for the disciples' suggestion. He agrees there's a great need. "Yes, you're so right. These people are going to be very hungry. Thanks for bringing that up. You'd better find a way to feed them."

I like to think of the disciples' reaction then. They're just like us. "Wait, what? No, no, that's not what we meant. We wanted *you* to do something. Send them away to get what they need on their own. We didn't mean we were supposed to deal with the problem. We were just bringing it to your attention!"

That's what we do, right? "Hey, God, you might not have noticed the issue of racism down here, but now that we've brought it to your attention, can you please do something about it? Change those racist people, please, and help the victims of racism. Thanks."

We don't expect to hear back from God what the disciples heard from Jesus: "So right. Big problem. You fix it. You feed them. You end racism."

The disciples then do just what we disciples now are likely to do: they plead a lack of resources. "You can't possibly expect us to feed all these people, can you? Look what we've got: five loaves and two fish. That's just barely enough to feed *us*, to keep us alive. How can we possibly deal with this huge problem? It's not possible."

And Jesus does something incredible. He doesn't suddenly produce a solution to the problem. He simply tells them to start. Just start.

If you were going to feed these people, what would you have to do? Get them to sit down on the grass. So start. Do the first thing. Solve that problem.

Jesus tells them to start, and to bring whatever they have to him. Do what you can, with what you've got, bring me all you can, even if it's not nearly enough. Jesus accepted what they had, thanked God for it, and broke it. Five loaves had now become ten pieces of bread. It's not much of a start, but it's a start.

After Jesus had blessed the bread and fish, and broken the bread, he handed the food back to the disciples. He doesn't do any of the feeding himself. He takes what the disciples have brought to him, the resources they had, and he blesses them, and hands them back to the disciples.

This is our model for changing the way things are. When we see a problem, we bring it to God's attention. God turns it back on us: you do something to make a difference. We look at our resources, and, of course, they're inadequate to solve the problem. But we offer what we have to God, who blesses it, and gives them back to us.

We don't seem that much ahead. But, we make a start. We do what we can to begin. We solve the first problem. We don't solve racism, but we accept a God-given gift of a Little Library of anti-racism books. We don't solve hunger, but we start a hunger meal. We make a start.

But we need to keep going. Solve the first problem, then make that next move, and solve the next problem. We do the first thing, and we see what God will do. Then we do the next thing.

Greta Thunberg sat outside her Parliament after school with a sign calling for a school strike one year, and the next year she was sailing across the Atlantic to address the United Nations.

Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi start a hashtag on social media after the death of Trayvon Martin: #BlackLivesMatter. And seven years later it's an international movement against racism.

They did what they could. It was small. A sign. A hashtag. Five loaves and two fish. Insufficient to the moment. Couldn't possibly accomplish anything. But it did. Because God took what they had to offer and blessed it, and handed it back to them.

There are many things in the world that need change, where the problem seems too big to manage, where the forces seem just too immovable to overcome. It would be easy to give in to despair, to say, "That's just the way it is" and leave it at that.

But Jesus pushes back. "You do something about it," he says. Just make a start. Take what you've got, give it to me to bless, then take it back and solve the first problem. Don't worry about solving every problem. Just solve the first one. And after you've done that, solve the next. Keep going, and watch what happens. Everyone may get fed after all!

Amen