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“His heart was moved with pity” (Matt 14:15).

Eighteenth Sunday of the Year

Isa 55:1-3; Ps 145; Rom 8:35, 37-39; Matt 14:13-21

The story of the feeding in the wilderness must have been deep in the Jesus tradition because all four evangelists record it. One reason for this was that so many later theological themes about Jesus converged there. The synoptics are close in detail and the fourth Gospel expands the event to make it the basis for the “Bread of Life” discourse in the Book of Signs. The story bridges the Exodus tradition of Moses and manna from heaven to the early church’s celebration of the Eucharist as the new Passover.

Mark’s account, presumed to be the earliest and the source for the others, gets special focus in Ched Myers’ 1988 book, *Binding the Strong Man*, a political reading of Mark that considers the charge that Jesus was mounting a challenge to both the Romans and the Jerusalem establishment by gathering at an alternate location with 5,000 followers during Passover. Even the arrangement of the crowd in groups of 50 and 100 suggests military order. The fourth Gospel, written much later, knocks down this idea by saying that Jesus fled into the mountains after the miraculous feeding when the crowd tried to make him king (John 6:15).

Matthew ties the withdrawal of Jesus to grieve the death of John Baptist to the tumultuous encounter with the crowd in the wilderness. As the stakes rise at John's brutal execution, Jesus needs time to reflect on his next move. But the appearance of the vast crowd stirs him to pity, confirming that his mission is compassion not conflict, even if it costs him his life. Jesus will forge ahead as the same Spirit that guided him in the desert when Satan tempted him with messianic power guides him again to be the nonviolent Suffering Servant. This is a critical turn in the Jesus story.

When Archbishop Oscar Romero was facing death threats and pressure from both Salvadoran military and his ecclesial enemies in Rome, he would find solace and renewed clarity by going among the people, who would crowd around and embrace him. He said, "With a people like these it is easy to be a shepherd." Urged by some to align with the popular front or to leave the country to save himself, Romero let compassion and nonviolence define his mission, even at the cost of his life.

Jesus fulfilled his messianic role by giving himself to others. The memory of bread in the wilderness found fulfillment in his self-emptying love on the cross as the new Passover, the Paschal Lamb, the Bread of Life. We are asked to multiply this miracle in our own time. When his disciples asked how such crowd could be fed, Jesus said, "Give them some food yourselves." As they would learn in memory of his own total gift, they knew he had really said, "Give them yourselves."

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