

I. Introduction

[Intro about “Big Batches” YouTube series, videos about feeding customers on a massive scale.]

Last week, we saw Jesus beginning to send out his 12 apostles to teach, preach and heal. This episode is interrupted by a grand birthday party in honor of King Herod, which I’m sure required lots of food prep and big batches of fancy ingredients. In juxtaposing **Herod’s feast** with **Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000**, Mark is deftly **contrasting the two events**.

Herod’s banquet was lavish and lewd, while Jesus’ is simple and sacred. Herod hosts his reception in a palace, but Jesus’ impromptu picnic is in the rolling hills of Galilee. Herod’s was for important people and meant to boost his standing with them, whereas Jesus’ feast is open to all and ministers to their needs. Most importantly, Herod’s party was self-serving and deadly (John the Baptist was beheaded), but Jesus’ banquet is full of compassion and life-giving.

The feeding of the 5,000 is perhaps Jesus’ greatest miracle. It is the only miracle recorded in all 4 gospel accounts; so it’s a big deal. This event portrays Jesus as the **compassionate shepherd**. And this morning, we’ll see how he shows compassion in three ways: by prioritizing rest for his disciples, by feeding the crowd God’s word, and finally by satisfying the hunger of all who are there. So, first it is compassion on his disciples, then the crowd, and finally everyone.

II. Compassion for His Exhausted Disciples: Rest (6:30-32)

This Thursday is Maundy Thursday, when Jesus transformed the Passover meal to the Last Supper. Now this miracle takes place during Passover (cf John 6:4), in the spring (“green grass”), likely in April of A.D. 29. The apostles have returned from their ministry described in verses 12 and 13, proclaiming the message of repentance, exorcising demons, and healing the sick.

In verse 30, they return to give a report on “*all that they had done and taught*,” which has been a lot. They are understandably exhausted and need a break. Jesus himself also needs time alone because, as described in Matthew’s parallel account, he was grieved by the death of John the Baptist (Matt 14:13).

But, our Lord doesn’t think about himself. He’s concerned about his wearied disciples, who have been laboring without rest. This is the **first instance in our passage of Jesus being a compassionate shepherd**.

He didn’t say to them, “Great job! Now, go back out and do more!” Jesus knew the danger of over-exertion and lack of rest. The apostles were so busy they didn’t even have time to eat. Jesus recognized their need to get away from the crowds, away from ministry and be refreshed through some **personal time being close to him**. So, he says in verse 31: “*Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.*”

So again, we find Jesus and the disciples in the boat, but this time to retreat and draw closer to God. A disciple is a follower, a learner. If you want to be a disciple of Christ, you must be in his presence. What’s more important than your service in church, as meaningful as it is, is your fellowship with Jesus.

Mary knew the more important thing, even though Martha was also doing valuable work. Jesus said to Martha, “you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good

portion...” (Luke 10:41-42). That good portion was to be with Christ. Jesus loved Martha and did not discount her service, but he was telling her that she needed to prioritize resting at his feet and listening to him.

I have a tendency to overwork and try to maximize each moment of the day; to be efficient, effective, and produce results. I believe I have a decently high capacity and ability to persevere through setbacks. I think many of you share the same qualities. By worldly standards, these are the marks of a dedicated worker.

But, as I’ve gotten older, I am learning that I need more time away from the busyness of life, of ministry and to commune with Christ in a quiet place, whether in my home or elsewhere. I need that time alone with the Lord at his feet, listening intently to him, and being refreshed in his presence. This can happen through prayer, study of God’s Word or a good Christian book, music, going to a place of natural beauty, or journaling.

I can tout my overworking as a badge of honor, but in reality, it leads to the neglect of both my physical and spiritual health. This neglect might go on for a while without any incident, until something happens...like a disc herniation, or a drifting relationship, or burn out. This is why I used verse 31 as a call to the CCF CG leaders last month to get away from campus, from serving, from homework and projects...to commune with God in nature and one another.

The **practice of a personal retreat** is something I commend to each of you. Build into your spiritual life a rhythm of rest and retreat so that you can focus on being with Christ through his word, prayer, and silent reflection. It might be hard to start this habit, but stick at it, and be blessed by the fruit of being alone with our Lord.

Parents, offer to watch the kids so your spouse can have his/her personal retreat. Grandparents, offer to watch your grandkids so their parents can go out, not on a date (though that’s important), but on a spiritual retreat. Singles, be willing to sacrifice a weekend plan (perhaps badminton/pickleball or a movie) or even take a day off from work to prioritize focused time with Christ.

III. Compassion for the Neglected Crowd: God’s Word (6:33-38)

Jesus takes his disciples to a “desolate place” in verse 32. We’re not exactly sure where, but this place was likely in the hill country north of Capernaum and west of Bethsaida (cf Lk 9:10). It must have been a location easily accessible by the crowd running on foot from all the surrounding towns (v. 33).

This large crowd thwarts, once again, Jesus’ attempt to compassionately give his disciples a restful retreat. You can imagine the disciples groaning at the sight of yet more crowds, since it was the crowds that made them weary and needing to get away in the first place. But, in verses 33 to 38, we see the **second instance of Jesus being the compassionate shepherd, this time to the crowd.**

We read in verse 33: “*Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.*” Why were they rushing over to meet Jesus? Verse 34 does say that they were like sheep without a shepherd, which suggests they were trying to find someone who could lead and care for them. I think that’s true, and we’ll get to verse 34 in just a moment.

But, commentators have noted another intriguing and plausible reason why they were coming to Christ. It was for him to **start an insurrection**. While large and insistent crowds are a recurrence in Mark, chances seem low that such a large group of onlookers would decide to pursue Christ on the spur of the moment, with knowledge of his intended destination, with the ability to follow the boat's route while travelling on foot, and arrive there before Jesus. Verse 44 says there were 5,000 men alone. When you add women and children, then you have a crowd of at least 10,000, if not up to 20,000. It does seem remarkable that so many people could suddenly and spontaneously run to meet Jesus.

Also, you have to understand the volatile political backdrop here. Rural Galilee was a stronghold of the Zealot movement, which sought to violently overthrow Roman rule, because they viewed it as a violation of allegiance to God.¹ So, it is possible that this large commotion in the wilderness was an intentional gathering permeated with messianic zeal; the assembled crowd was hoping to "sweep Jesus up as a guerrilla leader" (Edwards, 194). Recall in John's parallel account, the crowd tried to make Jesus king by force (6:14-15).

With this revolutionary setting in mind, **Jesus lifts his eyes and sees the great crowd**. He doesn't feed their fervor. He didn't react in frustration or annoyance. He didn't say, "Sorry, you failed to send me a Google calendar invite or schedule a Teams meeting, so my time is taken up; please check my availability for a future appointment." No, he felt sorry for them; he had deep compassion, from his gut, that moved his entire being. This was so because he saw that they were like "**sheep without a shepherd**."

This phrase is rich with Old Testament allusions, many of which support the idea that this crowd may have gathered to make Jesus their military leader. In Numbers 27:17, Israel is described as "sheep that have no shepherd," after the death of Moses; a problem resolved by the appointment of Joshua, who of course won many battles as Israel entered the Promised Land. In 1 Kings 22:17, this phrase is used to describe the army of Israel after King Ahab is killed.

Though this phrase has militaristic overtones, Jesus does not have waging a physical war in mind. He will not "march to a populist and militarist drumbeat" (Edwards, 195). Instead, he orchestrates compassion because the people are neglected; they are like helpless sheep without a caring shepherd.

Sheep truly are helpless. For instance, if they fall on their back, because it's so flat, they can't really get back on their feet. And if they get stuck on their back too long, the gas produced by the sheep's stomach builds up, inhibiting breathing, and they can die within hours. Sheep, though actually quite intelligent, wander around aimlessly without a shepherd. They cannot defend themselves, and can easily succumb to disease or immobility as their wool becomes overgrown, dirty, and heavy. So, they need an alert and compassionate shepherd to care for them.

Jesus' reaction and actions challenge us to examine our hearts: "**Are we compassionate like him?**" The compassion of God is always extended and felt through the reactions and actions of people. And while I've seen (and personally experienced) many acts of compassion in this church, which are wonderful and encouraging, they're almost always for people we already know. If we're honest with ourselves, we can

¹ Acts 5:37 references Judas the Galilean, who was the founder of this movement. Before Judas, there was already an independence streak in Galilee that resulted in stiff resistance against Herod the Great.

struggle mightily with being compassionate toward those in need whom we don't know, especially if we feel that their plight was avoidable or the result of their own poor decisions. But, such a heart stance grieves God. What should you do about it?

If you find it hard to show compassion on others, ask the Spirit to soften your heart by helping you **grasp the compassion you've been shown by God**. You were once a slave to sin, meaning you not only broke the law of God, but you sought to find ultimate meaning, worth, and purpose in things apart from God, such as money, power, status, grades, or relationships. And because of your rebellion against God, you deserved the penalty of eternal death. You were on the road to hell with no escape...until the Son of God appeared in mercy. He came to pay that penalty of eternal death on the cross and to reconcile you to the Father. He took your place on the cross and died so that you might live. **You were shown compassion when you deserved judgment.**

Beloved, when this gospel truth pierces your heart and fills it daily, you will want to show compassion to those in need. And to any of you who do not yet believe the gospel, turn from your sin and come to Christ, trusting in him as your Lord and Savior. Be washed clean by the blood he compassionately shed for you on the cross so that you might walk in newness of life. You see, Jesus saw the leaderless, neglected people and shows himself as the shepherd who truly cares, who lays down his life for the sheep (Psalm 23; Is 40:11; John 10). He laid down his life for you, so believe in him now and know his loving compassion.

Jesus' first reaction to seeing the crowd was to **feed them spiritually**. At the end of verse 34, we read: "*And he began to teach them many things.*" He demonstrated his compassion by **feeding them God's word**. That is true feeding. It is the very thing that he charged Peter to do in John 21 when he restored him: "Feed my lambs." It is the fundamental responsibility and call of the pastor. Jason, Henry, Stan, and I are here to pray for you, counsel you, and even (if you dare) hang out with you...but, our chief responsibility is to labor in feeding you the precious word of God. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

Now, speaking of bread, as wonderful as Jesus must have been as a teacher, inevitably, **physical hunger kicks in**. Spiritual feeding gives way to the need for physical feeding. In verse 35, the disciples note how late it is and then surprisingly, somewhat audaciously, command Jesus in verse 36: "*Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.*"

How does Jesus respond? It's a bit of a zinger. "*You give them something to eat,*" says our Lord. "I've been feeding the crowds all day from God's word. You guys go and feed their stomachs." Behind this startling response, Jesus, the compassionate shepherd, is actually **testing his disciples to see if they have eyes of faith**.² And do the disciples pass the test? Unfortunately, once again, they forget who stands right before them.

² Jesus knows exactly what he's doing here. In John 6, he said Philip, "'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?'" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.' (John 6:5-6).

Continuing in verse 37, they respond with sarcasm and skepticism: “*Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?*” Their incredulity stems from their worldly way of seeing the situation.

But, before we gang up on the disciples, can we really fault them? They’re trying to do what seems reasonable and prevent a situation from escalating into a crisis. Impressively, they do some quick math and determine 200 denarii, or a year’s wages, would barely be enough to feed the crowd. But who knows if they even have this money, can find so much food, and then lug it all back to the countryside. The challenges are many and mounting: being in a desolate place, lots of hungry people, limited funds, no available food, a time crunch...

What would you have done in that situation? Would you have fared any better than the disciples? I’m pretty sure I would not have.

By default, I tend to focus on the obstacles rather than on the one who overcomes them. Perhaps it’s my legal training, always preparing for the worst scenario, that moves me to fixate on the problems and mountains instead of the one who can move mountains. Back in 2023, when I was leading the effort to acquire the Mattress Firm building and land next door, I remember personal moments of doubt, hesitation, and fear. Yet, through prayer, the Spirit’s help, and encouragement from church leaders, I remembered to look at all of life not through human eyes, but God’s. Through eyes of faith, I could trust that in his perfect timing, he would provide what we need.

Jesus, perhaps with a bit of amusement, tells his disciples to “go and see” how many loaves of bread they can muster from the crowd. I can only imagine how dejected they must have sounded when they came back saying, “*Five, and two fish.*” Or, perhaps they said it a more defiant, smug tone: “See, Jesus, we told you that you should send these folks away...we only have five loaves of bread...oh, and also these two fish.” You can almost feel the intensity of the stare of the disciples as they look at Jesus, waiting to see what he’ll do next...

IV. Compassion for All Who Hunger: Bread of Life

“Sit down.” “Um, excuse me, what did you just say, Jesus?” “I said, have everyone sit down on the green grass in groups of fifties and hundreds.” “Uh...okay.” I imagine the disciples going through the crowd and breaking them up into smaller groups and wondering, “What on earth is Jesus going to do?”

Well, in verse 41, it’s not earth he looks to, but heaven. He blesses the loaves, breaks them, and then gives them to the disciples to distribute to all. He does the same with the two fish. Graciously, compassionately, Jesus uses what is available to him to multiply his blessings. And he ends up satisfying all. This is the **third instance of him showing compassion in this passage**. It is compassion for all who hunger.

What seems impossible to us is possible with God. Jesus works with what we have. He could have of course created a feast out of thin air; he did create the universe *ex nihilo* after all. But, **Jesus uses our offerings to multiply his glory and blessings**.

Going back to the Building Project, the reason we bought the land and building in 2023 was that we had a vision from God to magnify his blessings through our ministries, presence, and love. Given the growth of

Houston as a whole, and our community in particular, we seek to multiply the blessings of God through a larger facility not for our gain, but for the proclamation of the gospel.

Jesus, the Bread of Life, is telling his disciples, fishers of men, that as they distribute bread and fish to the crowd, they cannot forget their mission to go and make more disciples, and baptizing and teaching them all that he commanded them (Matt 28:19-20). Beloved, that mission is HCC's mission as well. We are the means by which Jesus will reach the lost and suffering. As I mentioned earlier, God uses us to share his compassion with others. And the Building Project enables for us to do those things. That is the "why" of our Project.

And yes, funding seems like a mountain in itself. But, as Jesus used the little boy's lunch to bless thousands, I pray you have eyes of faith to see that he can use your donations and pledges to the project, no matter how small, to multiply his blessings to many thousands more in the years to come. So, I encourage you to participate in the project through giving, and help HCC satisfy the hunger of future generations for Jesus, who is the gospel.

From verses 42 to 44, we see how **all were satisfied** and there were enough leftovers to fill each of the apostle's baskets to the brim. The satisfaction here goes beyond just food coma that comes after a delicious meal. It goes to soul satisfaction. Jesus' banquet does not merely relieve gnawing hunger, it overflows to a super-abundance of satisfaction both in the food eaten but also the one who provided it.

In one of the Beatitudes, our Lord said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt 5:6). The Beatitudes point to the present yet future kingdom of God. Yes, in a sense, Jesus has brought the kingdom of heaven to earth in his own kingly power. Today is Palm Sunday, and it commemorates Jesus humbly riding on a donkey into Jerusalem, being welcomed as a king. But, the kingdom of God has not been fully realized. Once Jesus returns, he will bring about God's kingdom in full, where, as Isaiah prophesies, "[T]he Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined" (25:6).

This miracle is a **foreshadow of that heavenly banquet** to come. Why do I say this? Go back to verse 41: "*And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people.*" Later in Mark 14:22, when Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper, Mark writes, "*And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'*"

The repetition of actions and language between the two verses is intentional and signals that Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 has a meaning far deeper than just being a feast in the wilderness.

Jesus Being Broken for Us:

No, just like how God's people were once in the wilderness led by Moses in their exodus out of Egypt from slavery to freedom, which was commemorated by the Passover feast, the people gathered in the Galilean wilderness were witnessing the greater Moses foreshadow the very act that would secure their exodus from

slavery to sin and death to freedom in righteousness and eternal life. **This act was the breaking of the Bread of Life, Jesus' own body; his sacrificial death on the cross.**

I already noted how Jesus transformed the Passover to symbolize the true redemption and foreshadowing of his death for sinners. And just as the crowds who would welcome him on Palm Sunday misunderstand what kind of king Jesus came to be, so too do those who are fed in this miracle misunderstand Jesus' identity. Both crowds thought he would be a political, military liberator. Yes, Jesus did come to liberate and free the oppressed, but it was a spiritual liberation from the bondage to sin.

Contrary to popular expectations, his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). It was not going to be inaugurated immediately, but only after he died and then was raised to life. There would be no kingdom without the cross. The Jews who welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday were expecting that a lamb would be sacrificed in remembrance of the blood of the lambs that saved them from judgment and destruction in Moses' time (Exodus 12:3-6). It never crossed their mind that their Messiah himself would be that very lamb sacrifice.

The Lamb of God would take upon himself the sins of all who trust in him and bear the judgment of God on their behalf. By the blood of this Lamb, we who believe are not destroyed. Because **Jesus, as the Bread of Life, was broken for us, we are blessed and made whole.** Because he emptied himself, the wrath of God against our sin was satisfied, we are fed and satisfied.

V. Conclusion

Jesus is the Lamb of God, and he is also the good, compassionate shepherd.

He does not leave his sheep wanting or untended, but feeds them God's word and restores their soul. He leads them not in paths of political power or military gain, but righteousness for his name's sake. He causes them to sit on green grass and feast on his teaching, on miraculous bread, and eventually himself, as the true bread from heaven. Because Jesus' body was broken for you, you need not fear any evil even though you may walk in the valley of the shadow of death. Because he rose from the dead, he is always with you and his rod and staff comfort you.

Beloved, because you are in Christ, the goodness and mercy of the Lord will follow you and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. There and now, you will forever be satisfied and forever praising the wonder and glory of the compassion of the Lamb of God who was slain for you (Rev 5:12). Hear the voice of this compassionate shepherd and follow him as he calls you by name all the days of your life.