

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT (LAETARE)

ANNO † DOMINI 2022

Did you know that the Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only one of Jesus' miracles¹ to be included in all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? More than changing water into wine, more than the stilling of the storm, more than the healing of any individual, the Evangelists wanted you to know *this* story.

I thought it'd be helpful, then, to begin with a harmony, a mashup, if you will, of all four accounts, so that we get a fuller picture of what happened that day on the other side of the Sea of Galilee:

Now when Jesus heard this, He withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by Himself. And a multitude followed Him, because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick. And He has compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And He welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God, and cured those who had need of healing. Now the day began to wear away; and the disciples came and said to Him, "Send the crowd away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test Him, for He Himself knew what He would do...²

He would *feed* them, as we know well from the rest of the story. He would multiply the five barley loaves and two fish borrowed from a boy in the crowd, feeding all five thousand men, plus women and children, until they were satisfied.

Now, when you put it all together, what you get is an unmistakable portrait of Jesus' *compassion*. He had compassion on the crowd, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. They were lost and leaderless. The priests had abandoned them, fulfilling the word of the prophet Ezekiel,

Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My

¹ Apart from the Resurrection.

² Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10b-17; John 6:1-15.

sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.³

But Jesus welcomed them. He was not upset with them for following Him, even though He was clearly trying to get some alone time. He did what the other shepherds had not done. He fed the starving sheep with His Word. He healed the sick and bound up the injured. He worked *tirelessly*, leaving not a single sheep behind. And even when it was evening and the day was over, He did not leave them, but insisted on giving them their daily bread.

And remember, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the reason *why* Jesus was trying to get away is because He had heard that His cousin John had been beheaded in prison. He was probably wanting to mourn, to weep for John, as He wept for Lazarus, and to pray. But He didn't get the chance. Duty called. In John's gospel, we also learn that some Jews were already seeking to kill Him, because not only was He "breaking the Sabbath," but He was even calling God His own Father, making Him equal to God, saying, "My Father is working until now, and I am working" (5:18). Either way, Jesus had problems of His own, but He was able to set them aside for the sake of the sheep.

Contrast this with the disciples, who came and said to Jesus, "Send them away." Before this, they, too, had been sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal, Jesus having given them power and authority to do so. "And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere" (Luke 9:6). But unlike Jesus, their compassion had a *limit*. They were tired. They had problems of their own to deal with. Jesus must have known this: He took them away *with* Him to that desolate place, after all. But do you think they welcomed the crowds when they came? Do you think they felt compassion? Or did they roll their eyes at the sight of the multitude? Smile through clenched teeth, annoyed that their little vacation had been canceled?

Compassion fatigue is a real thing, and it affects more than just the Twelve. St. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:23, "Be kind and compassionate to one another." But that's a tall order. Compassion literally means to "suffer with" someone. In the Greek, the word is *spagchna*, which means "to be moved to pity from one's inward parts," from your gut. And we might feel that way *sometimes*. We might be moved to such pity *on occasion*. But not always, because, frankly, it's hard. It's hard to care about someone else's problems when you've got so many of your own. And each of us is dealing with something, some pain or disappointment in our lives, some guilt or uncertainty. We know we're called to have compassion, to bear each other's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ, but the truth is we are in desperate need of compassion ourselves. We

³ Ezekiel 34:2-6.

need someone to suffer with us, to feel our pain, and to fill us with good things. We are sheep ourselves, and we need help.

Enter Jesus, the Good Shepherd, whose tireless compassion extends beyond the feeding of the five thousand. This past Friday, the Church celebrated the Annunciation, the anniversary of the conception of our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. “Therefore,” said the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, “the Child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). And yet, the very moment the Word became flesh and dwelt among us as a tiny zygote⁴ He began to suffer. Not because He became man, but because He humbled Himself and became lowly, as when a king, who has great power, refrains from using this power, and acts and lives like a poor peasant.⁵ He did this in order to be with us, to feel our pain, and to carry our sorrows. That’s why Jesus withdrew again from the crowds when He perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king. He didn’t come to be king. He came to suffer great affliction and die. And one year later, on the anniversary of the Passover, He did; the Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep.

And the third day He took it up again. Through death He destroyed the power of death and ascended to sit at the right hand of the Majesty on high. That means that you have a God who is not only able to sympathize with your weaknesses, but who is also a very present help in trouble. He is not upset with you when you call upon Him. He welcomes you, and He will never tire of hearing your pleas. Rather, in the words of the prophet Isaiah,

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
His understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.⁶

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zygote>

⁵ *Luther's Small Catechism Annotated by Edward W. A. Koehler*, 151.

⁶ Isaiah 40:28-31.

As Jesus says to the crowds a little later in John, "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:48-51). It was never just about the bread, but Jesus' compassion, His suffering with us, His incredible capacity for *splagchna*, was always about pointing poor sinners to Himself. Man does not live by bread alone, or by peace or health or whatever else we might seek after, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deuteronomy 8:3). By *the* Word, who gave Himself for the life of the world. "Eat Me," says Jesus, "Believe in Me, and everything will be OK. I will take care of you, and you shall be satisfied."

What happens, then, is that we begin to *fulfill* the law of Christ, being kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave us. Trusting our Lord's promises, we begin to live in such a way that shows our hope is in Him and not in the food that perishes. We call upon Him in every trouble. We gladly hear and learn His Word. We receive His true body and blood. And in our sufferings we rejoice, knowing that we do not suffer alone. We are not lost, but found, not abandoned, but loved, and the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ is the proof. "In the world," Jesus said, "you will have trouble; but take heart, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

So, on this Laetare Sunday, dear Christians, rejoice.⁷ Like Lent, this world may seem a desolate place, but Christ is with you, and Easter is coming. Our hope is not in this life only, but we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. We believe that we shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. Good Lord, deliver us.

In † Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria

⁷ *Laetare* means "Rejoice" (Isaiah 66:10a).