

Matthew 14:13–21; Romans 9:1–5; Psalm 17:1–7, 15; Isaiah 55:1–5; Psalm 145:8–9, 14–21

Jesus does not ask His disciples to be sufficient. He asks us to bring what we have, remain near Him, and participate in His compassion.

When Hunger Has a Name

In the town of Tralee on Christmas Day, 1846, on Ireland's western coast the *Kerry Examiner* reported about a family in dire need. Christmas had come, but for this household there was no feast, no table spread, and no reason to celebrate. The newspaper was reporting the investigation into the death of Michael Connell.

Michael was a widower, somewhere between forty-five and fifty years old, raising three children alone. The youngest was five; the eldest was twelve. For several weeks, all three children had been confined to their sickbeds, their bodies weakened by hunger. The family's only support came from an older woman who begged for them. What she gathered amounted to less than a penny's worth of food a day, and many days passed when the family tasted nothing at all.

When officials entered the room, Michael's body lay on a miserable bed of straw. Two of his children lay beside him, almost gasping from hunger and too weak to rise. The third child, sick and weakened like the others, had left the bed and gone into town to beg for food. The coroner, Justin Supple, paid for a coffin from his own pocket, but the newspaper could offer no easy ending. Michael was dead, two children lay starving beside him, and the third was searching the streets for something the family could eat.¹

The report did not allow its readers to hide behind a statistic.² Hunger had entered one small room. A father dead of hunger, two children to the straw beside him, and sent another sick child on the streets begging for food. Once suffering has a face, it becomes much harder to send it away. We can hear of hunger in the world, but once we name it and add a face to it we don't really identify with it...

In the first Gospel of the New Testament, Matthew brings us to another place, where hunger gathers in a crowd. The setting is different, but the human need is familiar: evening is coming, people have nowhere to eat, and the disciples know their resources cannot meet the need. They see an impossible number and begin deciding where the people should go. Jesus looks at the same crowd and sees people he loves. Before bread is multiplied, compassion refuses to send the hungry away. That is where the Gospel of God begins in this passage.

Jesus Sees What Others Would Send Away.

Key Point: Jesus Sees What Others Would Send Away

¹ "Tralee & the Great Famine," Irish Newspaper Archives, August 15, 2023, quoting the *Kerry Examiner*, December 25, 1846; "Starvation—Inquest in Tralee," *Views of the Famine*, reproducing the *Cork Examiner*, December 28, 1846.

² History does not tell us what became of Michael's children. Their names disappeared from the record, and we do not know whether they survived the winter.

In Matthew chapter 14, Jesus had just heard about the death of John the Baptist. John was more than a public figure. He was the forerunner who had prepared the way, the faithful voice silenced by a fearful ruler and someone he knew dearly. With this news Jesus withdrew by boat to solitary place and *“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick”* (Matthew 14:14).

Jesus is carrying grief, yet grief does not close him to the pain before him. He does not deny his own sorrow. He does not become hard because the world has been hard with him. He sees the crowd, and compassion rises.

The word Matthew uses is not polite concern (**σπλαγχνίζομαι**, splangkh-nid'-zom-ahee). It is mercy felt deep within the body. Jesus does not merely notice need. He allows the need before him to make a claim upon his presence.

That is where holiness begins in this passage—not with the disciples doing more, but with the heart of Christ. **The Lord we meet in Jesus is the gracious God proclaimed by the psalmist.**

“The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love” (Psalm 145:8).

Christian compassion does not begin with our ability to care. It begins with the mercy of Christ reaching us, holding us, and teaching our hearts to see.

The Story: The Arithmetic of Scarcity

By evening, the disciples see the problem. The place is remote. The hour is late. The crowd is large. Their solution is reasonable: send the people into the villages to buy food.

We don't cruelty in their words. I hear intention and resolution—and perhaps a little self-protection. The disciples do not have enough to feed them. I am understanding what they are thinking... “If this need becomes ours, it will consume us. Let someone else handle it...”

We know that arithmetic. A family need can outgrow the budget. A ministry opportunity may require more hands... Some people or a person can need more time than we know how to give. The disciple see five thousand people and only count count five loaves of bread.

You see, scarcity may tell the truth about our resources, but it can become a hiding place when we assume our only choices are to fix everything or walk away.

This is Jesus' answer: *“You give them something to eat”* (Matthew 14:16).

That command sounds impossible... But Jesus is not asking them to manufacture abundance or carry the crowd alone. **He is drawing them out of withdrawal and into relationship with him.**

They answer with what they lack. Jesus answers with an invitation. *“Bring them here to me”* (Matthew 14:18).

Here is the turning point. Jesus does not say, “Try harder,” “Pretend it is enough,” or “Feel ashamed that you cannot fix this.” He asks them to bring what they have... Apart from Jesus, duty becomes burden. But in his hands, participation becomes grace.

Continuing with the Opener: A Suitable Channel

A few weeks before the report about Michael Connell reached the newspaper, a Dublin Friend named Joseph Bewley gathered twenty other Quakers to consider the famine growing around them.

The need was overwhelming... Ireland had more than eight million people. The entire Society of Friends in Ireland numbered only about three thousand, and Friends most of them were located in the eastern counties, it was the western counties of Ireland where the suffering was greatest.

So, Joseph Bewley and the Friends of Ireland could not match the need.

Yet these Friends knew business, shipping, purchasing, storage, and organization. They had relationships, meetinghouses, kitchens, ledgers, and hands willing to work. So, they placed what they possessed within the reach of compassion.

The Central Relief Committee gathered donations, purchased food, sent clothing, supplied soup boilers,³ and later distributed seeds. They worked with local people across religious lines. No one had to become a Quaker or attend a Friends meeting to receive food. Historian Rob Goodbody later called their work “a suitable channel”—a way through which help could pass from those who could give to those who were hungry.⁴

We cannot say that their food reached Michael Connell's children. But children like them were the reason Friends refused to let the enormity of the famine become an excuse for standing at a safe distance.

These Friends did not end the famine. And they did not feed everyone. Yet nearly eight thousand tons of food, almost three hundred soup boilers, and seed for thousands of small farmers passed through the relief effort.⁵

These Friends did not become the Breadgiver. They became a channel—willing hands through which mercy could move.

Take Away: The Sufficiency Belongs to Christ

Matthew says Jesus took the loaves, looked toward heaven, gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples. The disciples become the channels of mercy... Notice the movement: from the hands of the disciples into the hands of Jesus, and from the hands of Jesus back through the hands of the disciples to the hunger before them. *“They all ate and were satisfied”* (Matthew 14:20).

The miracle does not advertise the disciples' competence. It reveals the sufficiency of Christ.

³ Soup boilers (often called soup kettles or commercial / steam kettles) are deep commercial or industrial pots used to cook, re-heat, and safely hold large batches of liquid foods like soups, stews, chilis, gravies, and sauces at steady serving temperatures...

⁴ Rob Goodbody, *A Suitable Channel: Quaker Relief in the Great Famine* (Bray, Ireland: Pale Publishing, 1995); Goodbody, “Quakers & the Famine,” *History Ireland*.

⁵ Goodbody, “Quakers & the Famine.”

They did not create bread. They received what Christ gave and carried it to the crowd.

This is the Gospel pattern. Grace comes before response. Christ gives before he commands. The One who calls them to feed the crowd is the One who first places the bread in their hands.

At the center of our faith is not humanity climbing toward God with enough goodness, enough strength, or enough sacrifice. **At the center is Jesus Christ.** He receives what is broken, bears what we cannot carry, and offers his own life for the life of the world.

Then the living Christ forms a people through whom his mercy becomes visible.

That is holiness. Holiness is not possessing enough for every need. Holiness is Christ's compassion becoming visible through surrendered lives.

Holy Participation

This week at Indiana Yearly Meeting, Jim and Diane Sheron, Debbie, Lisa Wimmer, and I kept hearing the same question: Why can't we get more people to attend or become involved? I have asked some version of that question for years. Some people in our meetings named apathy; others named complacency. At lunch, Lisa and I discussed what was said and wondered whether there might be another reason.

What if some people care, but fear what caring will cost? Perhaps they have served before—or watched dependable people get used again and again or even got taken advantaged of... What if people fear that “one yes” will become “five more requests.” Maybe showing up is a blank check, and the only safe boundary is never to enter?

That discussion helped me hear the disciples differently. Sending the crowd away may be the reflex of people who see a need so large they fear it will swallow them. And it makes Jesus' two instructions all the more important: give them something to eat, bring what you have to me.

Jesus refuses distortions...

{Squirrel} Seriously. When we are thinking by ourselves, in know in our our own heads, we can develop all kinds of worries and doubts...

But Jesus neither lets insufficiency become an excuse to send the hungry away nor makes the disciples the source of provision. He calls them to stay near, bring what is theirs to bring, receive what he gives, and carry it faithfully.

That is holy participation. It is neither apathy nor anxious overfunctioning. It does not say, “Someone else should care,” or, “Everything depends on me.” It says, “Christ has shown me the person before me, and I will place my part in his hands.”

You may not have enough to solve the whole problem. You may have a meal, a car ride, a skill, an hour, a patient ear, a relationship, or a prayer. As a church, our five loaves may appear small: a building, a kitchen, a benevolence fund, community relationships, and people who know how to notice. In Christ's hands, little can become mercy with an address.

Psalm 145:16 tells us, “*You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*”

The open hand belongs first to God. Our hands become holy when they remain open beneath his.

An Invitation to Open Worship

In a moment, we will enter **Open Worship**.

Do not use the silence to make promises Jesus has not asked you to make. Do not shame yourself for what you do not possess. And do not use your limits as permission to look away.

Instead, sit before the living Christ with three queries:

- Where am I tempted to send the need away because it feels larger than me?
- Where am I carrying a burden Christ has not asked me to carry?
- What has Christ already placed in my hands for the person he is teaching me to see?

Perhaps your offering feels like five loaves beside five thousand people. Bring it to Jesus.

The need may be greater than you. It is not greater than Christ.

The way of Christ is neither withdrawal nor anxious self-saving. We are not the Breadgiver. We are the willing hands through which the Breadgiver chooses to serve.

Friends, Jesus still looks upon the hungry with compassion. He still receives what his people surrender. He still places mercy into ordinary hands.

Jesus says, *"You give them something to eat"* (Matthew 14:16).

Amen?