

Healing First

Isaiah 55:1–5 · Psalm 145:8–9, 14–21 · Romans 9:1–5 · Matthew 14:13–21

Today we will begin with a phone call. You may know the one. Maybe it's a call that comes in the middle of an ordinary day and rearranges everything. Somebody you love is gone. And not gone gently, but gone violently. Gone because somebody with power decided their life was expendable.

We step back in time ... John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, the one who baptized him, was in prison for publicly calling out Herod's marriage. At Herod's birthday banquet, his stepdaughter danced so well that Herod promised her anything, up to half his kingdom. Her mother, still nursing a grudge against John, told her daughter to ask for John's head. Guards were sent. John was beheaded, his head delivered on a platter.

That's what Jesus has just heard. That's the call Jesus gets. John is dead. Beheaded. Not in battle. Not in a hunting accident. Executed as a party favor, because a king couldn't stand to be embarrassed in front of his guests.

And this isn't some distant acquaintance. This is John. Cousin. Childhood friend. The one who baptized him in the Jordan. The brave one who was already preaching this same dangerous good news before Jesus ever opened his mouth in public.

We need to sit with that before we go any further, because sometimes we want to skip past Jesus' grief and get to the miracle. But Matthew won't let us skip it. The gospel begins: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." That's not a strategic retreat. That's a man who just lost somebody he loved, trying to get somewhere quiet enough to fall apart.

We know that boat. We've all needed that get-away boat. And Jesus didn't get to stay in it. Word travels faster than boats do, and the crowds beat him to the shore. "When the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot..."

Paul knows grief

In Romans 9 Paul is also carrying grief. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people." Paul is grieving; grieving for his own kinspeople, the ones who haven't received the gospel he's giving his life to preach.

Notice what Paul doesn't do with that grief. He doesn't let it curdle into resentment. He doesn't withdraw from ministry to nurse it in private. He keeps preaching. He keeps loving the very people whose rejection is breaking his heart. Grief and love for others, held in the same chest, at the same time. Not one after the other. Together.

What the crowd was carrying

Let's catch up with that crowd that's chasing after Jesus ... what is that crowd looking for? Think about what "Messiah" meant to that crowd waiting on the shore. It didn't mean gentle healer. It meant king. It meant conqueror. Somebody who was finally going to make Rome pay and finally going to make Herod pay.

If there was ever a moment where an angry, vengeful Messiah might have made sense to people, this was it. Jesus had just lost somebody to that exact kind of violence. "Come on out of that boat, Jesus. Somebody's got to pay for John."

But, that's honour and shame logic, the same logic that just killed John. Notice something about that logic, too: it's inherited. Nobody in that crowd invented it. They inherited it from generations of "this is just how the world works." It's the faith of belonging before it's ever been tested, believing what the tribe believes, wanting what the tribe wants, because the tribe is safety and the tribe is identity. There's nothing shameful in that; every one of us starts there. It's how faith survives its childhood.

But there comes a day when the tribe wants something your own gut can't sign off on anymore. Maybe it's a call for somebody to pay. Maybe it's just a quiet unease that the story you were handed doesn't quite cover what you're now living through. That unease isn't the collapse of your faith. It's the doorway to a more honest faith; a faith that's finally yours, examined and chosen rather than inherited and assumed. Nobody can walk you through that doorway. You have to want to see clearly enough to walk through it yourself. But whenever a soul is ready, the story is right there: what happens next on that shoreline is exactly what it looks like when someone refuses the crowd's inherited logic and answers from a deeper, more examined place instead.

Jesus steps off the boat into all of that grief, all of that expectation, all of that hunger for revenge, and Matthew tells us what he does first. Not eventually. First. From Matthew 14: "He had compassion on them and healed their sick." Healing. First.

Beloved before anything is fixed

Before one loaf gets broken, before one fish gets multiplied, Jesus is moving through that crowd laying hands on the people who are hurting. And here's what I want us to notice about the order of things: he doesn't ask what they've done, what they believe, what they've earned, or whether their faith checks out. He just meets the hurt.

This is where Psalm 145 comes in and just says the quiet part out loud. "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and the Lord's compassion is over all that has been made." A few verses later: "The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down... The Lord is near to all who call." That's not poetry about someday. That's a description of what Jesus is doing in real time on that shoreline.

"Compassion" in the Greek is a gut word. It means being moved deep inside by another person's pain. So what Matthew shows us is not Jesus ignoring his own grief, or pretending John's death has not wounded him. Jesus is grieving, and still, he lets the suffering in front of him matter. That is the difference between pain that closes in on itself and pain that becomes love. When hurt turns only inward, it can harden into bitterness. But when hurt is opened toward the wounds of others, it can become a channel of healing, not because our pain disappears, but because it no longer has the final word.

There's a truth in that crowd nobody says out loud, but we need everybody to hear today: there is nothing wrong with you that must be fixed before you're worth loving. There is no version of you that somebody else's opinion could shrink down to "less than." Whatever the world's scorekeeping has told you about your worth, whatever verdict got handed to you by people who never once knelt down to look at your actual wound, it was wrong. Compassion doesn't wait for you to earn it, and it doesn't diminish you to receive it. That's not sentiment, it's the whole logic of that shoreline. Healing comes before worthiness is proven, because our worth was never something that needed proving.

So what does that mean for us in our practical world of "get this job done"? It means the people around us who are struggling don't need us to have our own grief resolved before we show up for them. It means the coworker who's short with everybody this week might be one phone call away from their own boat ride. It means before we organize the meal train or plan the program or fix the problem, we ask a simpler question first: who here is hurting, and can I sit with that before I do anything else? Healing first isn't a slogan. It's a sequence we can actually practice this week, in our own rooms, before we get to the harder work of fixing anything.

The economy of enough

Only then does the feeding happen.

But, by evening, the disciples are doing math. "Send the crowds away so they can go buy food." Reasonable. Jesus says, "They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat." The disciples go straight to the budget, bless them. We can't afford that. "We've only got five loaves and two fish. That's it."

Notice what's actually happening in that math. The disciples aren't wrong about the numbers. Five loaves and two fish really can't feed that many people, by the world's accounting. But the world's accounting runs on a hidden assumption: that there isn't enough, that supply is fixed, that somebody's abundance always means somebody else's lack. It's the same scarcity logic that made Herod's court trade a man's head for a party trick, that makes empires hoard and crowds hunger for vengeance instead of bread. Scarcity isn't just a shortage of resources. It's a way of seeing that convinces us to grip tighter, give less, and assume there's a ceiling on grace.

Here's where Isaiah 55 breaks in: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." God's invitation was never based on what people could afford or what they'd earned. Isaiah says it plainly, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?" because this world is always trying to sell us something, bless them ... trying to sell us what God is already giving away.

That's exactly what Jesus does with five loaves and two fish. He doesn't try to manufacture more first. He takes what little the disciples have, the "not-enough," the "barely-anything," and he takes it, blesses it, breaks it, gives it. Take. Bless. Break. Give. The miracle isn't that scarcity got overpowered by some outside force. The miracle is that the moment those loaves stopped being clutched and started being released, they turned out to be connected to a supply nobody in that crowd could see the edges of. Abundance was never about how much sat in the basket. It was about whether the basket stayed open.

Here's how this can be done by us, this very day. Many of us think, often times during our day, that we're too under-resourced to help anybody. Not enough time, not enough money, not enough energy left after our own week, after fighting our many battles. The disciples felt that exact shortage. But Jesus didn't ask them to find

more first. He asked them to hand over what they already had and watch what God did with it. That changes the question we ask ourselves. Not "do I have enough to give," but "am I willing to hand over the little I have and let something larger than my own ledger multiply it." That's a testimony, a Tuesday afternoon, a casserole, an hour of childcare, a hard conversation you've been avoiding. Small, handed over, blessed, broken, given. And somehow, it's enough for everybody. Whatever you're holding onto out of fear that releasing it will leave you with nothing, that fear is the last thread of Herod's economy still wrapped around your hands. Open them.

Five thousand men ate that day, not counting women and children; this is closer to ten or fifteen thousand people; and there's more left over than they started with. Twelve baskets. One for every disciple who thought they didn't have enough... bless them.

What this asks of us

So, here's what I want us to take with us.

We live in a world that still runs on Herod's principle: get shamed, strike back; get threatened, hoard what's yours. We've all had our version of that boat ride, news that made us want to escape to somewhere quiet and fall apart. Some of us are in that boat right now.

But look at what's possible even in grief, even with good reason for anger. Paul preaches through his anguish. Jesus heals through his grief. Neither of them waits until their own pain resolves to reach for somebody else's. And neither of them waits for the crowd's permission to see the world differently than the crowd sees it. That's the quiet invitation running underneath this whole story: the invitation to stop borrowing a script that runs on scarcity and shame, and to start examining, for yourself, what you actually believe about what God is and who you are to God. That examination is not betrayal of the faith you were raised in. It's what faith does when it grows up.

Psalms 145 says God is near to all who call. Isaiah 55 says come, no money required. And Matthew shows us what that looks like with skin on: compassion first, abundance following, worth already settled before the bread is ever broken.

What would it look like for us to lead with that this week? Not after we've settled our scores. Not once our own grief has resolved. Not once we've proven that someone deserves it. First. Take what we have. Bless it. Break it. Give it.

Kindness multiplies. With small acts and generous hearts, we can change the world. Healing first. Everything else follows. God bless us on our journey.

Amen.