

## **A God who Moves**

Menno Mennonite Church

August 2, 2020

### **Outdoor Worship**

**Purpose:** To envision the God who is moved by the ways of the world.

**Message:** God responds to our needs and presently attends to them.

**Scripture:** Matthew 13:13-21

**Synopsis:** We sometimes wonder where and how God feels about the human condition. Yet we are given ample evidence within the scriptures to tell us. In context, this miracle of feeding the 5000 comes at a tough time for Jesus. He was run out of Nazareth, and he just was informed of the death of John the Baptist. It is in his withdraw to cope and pray about this last happening that he is set upon by the multitude looking for him with need. It would have been understandable for Jesus to take a break, send them away, and take some well-earned alone time. Instead, Jesus encounters the needs of the people and takes pity on them, laying aside his own moment for theirs. He then empowers the disciples to meet the needs that they find in their midst and minister, demonstrating the kingdom of God he had just been describing.

Jesus meets us where we are with compassion that he extends and acts on in our midst. How might that steer our response to the many needs of today's world?

Matthew 14:13–21 (NRSV)

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus heard this,

he withdrew from there in a boat  
to a deserted place  
by himself.

But when the crowds heard it,  
they followed him on foot from the towns.

<sup>14</sup> When he went ashore,  
he saw a great crowd;  
and he had compassion for them  
and cured their sick.

<sup>15</sup> When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said,

“This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late;

send the crowds away  
so that they may go into the villages  
and buy food for themselves.”

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to them,

“They need not go away;  
you give them something to eat.”

<sup>17</sup> They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”

<sup>18</sup> And he said, “Bring them here to me.”

<sup>19</sup> Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish,  
he looked up to heaven,  
and blessed and broke the loaves,  
and gave them to the disciples,  
and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

<sup>20</sup> And all ate and were filled;  
and they took up  
what was left over of the broken pieces,  
twelve baskets full.

<sup>21</sup> And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children



Have you ever built a terrarium? I am guessing that you have—the project where you take a pickle jar and layer in rocks, soil, plants and they like—designing everything just so, balancing our water, drainage and air. Likely this is something you did or will do for a biology class somewhere along the line. The goal is to set things up just so within all of this so you can screw on the lid, set the environment on the shelf, and leave it to its own devices—breathing, moving, raining so that everything whirls along without intervention from outside hands. And so it goes until something upsets this balance and the wheels come off and everything dries up and ends up in the landfill, the ecosystem having served its purpose. It's a closed little bubble of our own creation, living its life and whirring along with a care from the outside, spare an occasional tap on the glass to knock some condensation loose.

I come here because by in large that's how we see the world in which we live: the closed system loop of creation with God out there watching all spin on. Yes, I know that our theology and our core beliefs say otherwise, and I believe otherwise, but most of the time this is the world in which we live, move, and most of all feel. That the world spins on and God is out there watching it all in the meantime, waiting for the theological timer to go off so what is next can happen. This is our popular notion within the western world: God may be out there somewhere, good for the occasional favor now and again when our backs are up against the wall. We here in the terrarium are pretty much on our own and by ourselves, constrained by the limits of what the conditions may be around us.

It is precisely this feeling and assumption of the world that we need to sit time to time with a story like this. Not because it is a great “Jesus the wonderful” magic trick that wows the crowd and wows us, though it is. Not solely because it is a story of how Jesus did things around people, though it is. Not only because it is amazing and establishes the bonafides of who Jesus was in the context of who and what he said he was—but that is there too. It is easy to look at the miracles of the bible—especially this miracle with its incredible adaptation of the everyday, and wonder what to do with them but smile and nod and wonder “did that really happen?” Sometimes we can struggle to integrate something this extraordinary into our ordinary world, even when we have known this and loved this for our whole lives.

Actually, I think it is precisely this sort of thing that we need from time to time to put a crack into the “closed loop” thinking that can trap us all. Because what really gets me about all

of this is 2 things at work in this text that I think makes it especially relevant for our times and us today precisely because they are the antidote to the mentality of the terrarium that we have a God who cares and is moved by what is in front of God, and that same God invites us into sharing the extraordinary in the world not out of our own power, but in God's power. We, us disciples, are invited to share the way of the kingdom and that makes all the difference.

Let me explain a bit. One of the things that we lose by reading the bible as we do I am firmly convinced, is the flow of the story. Because we break down one thing to the next to the next we can snip the threads of context that the story relies on for its broader meaning. This is one of those cases that gets us in trouble. Because we read this solely as a stand alone story about 12 baskets of left overs, we throw away the beginning: *when he had heard this, he went away alone...* Wait—when he had heard what? It turns out that the connections here are rather important. Just before this in chapter 13 he tries and tries to explain the nature of the kingdom of God to anyone who will listen and very few understand. Then he goes on to Nazareth and tries to teach, only to be dismissed as “Joseph and Mary’s boy—the carpenter’s son” and run out of town. Then he is told of the fate of his cousin John who met his sticky end at Harrod’s hand. That is what delivers him here, and it makes awfully good sense from the perspective of basic selfcare that now would be a fine time to take a break and regroup. That’s what he is trying to do when he is caught by the crowds seeking yet more from him. It would be more than understandable if Jesus had simply placed the “Do not Disturb” sign on the doorknob and laid down for a long nap, and longer prayer. Instead, Jesus is moved with compassion—the Greek here would be best translated with “his bowels were wrenched with emotion”. It is this deep emotion that is found throughout the Gospel: that moves the Good Samaritan to act, Jesus to heal, the prodigal’s father to embrace—on and on it goes. Here it moves Jesus to lay aside his plans, heal the sick, and then feed the thousands.

These emotions are important. We might be drawn to or hold within us the notion of the “immortal, unchangeable, God only wise”. Aristotle, whose thought underlies so much of ours whether we know it or not depicts the divine as the “unmoved mover” behind everything. In short the terrarium God who puts things in order, closes the lid and walks away, specifically not moving or caring what ticks along inside. This has been the root of many classic heresies which would deny the possibility of a God who is changed by the conditions of the world. That simply

is not true. The Old Testament speaks of God's compassion and conviction—even God's repentance—time and again. And the witness of Jesus tells us that this is far from the case. Our God feels for us, cares for us, is moved with us. The Word made flesh is so moved by the issues of the flesh that he is able to put his needs on hold to embrace and respond in compassion right when he was at his lowest. That is indeed good news because it means that God will see our plight, hear our prayers and feel compassion for us. It is also a challenge because the compassion is never ours alone. We are never 100 percent right, and there could be time where God compassion will inspire our conviction as well as our comfort when we find ourselves part of that which grieves God something else that we might want to consider.

Because our compassion is usually conditional. It is filtered and refined by the nuances of the circumstances and the opportunities that we have to act on our compassion. For me, compassion is frequently my friend as I see suffering and want desperately to help. I am the guy who gets glued to the TV screen watching natural disasters, fighting the uncontrollable urge to jump in the car and just go there and start doing what ever needs to be done. But seldom (alright, never) do I actually move on the compassion because there are so many good reasons not to. I am not a trained first responder. I have responsibilities that roots me and holds me fast. Even when tragic things do happen near to hand, it can be hard to know how best to respond. Like the disciples, we know all too well the practical sieve through which we pass our compassion all the time. Our capacities are too thin, our resources too stretched, our abilities too paltry. All of which are valid responses. Ultimately, the disciples are talking sense when they advise Jesus to get the folks on their way to the restaurants where the capacity exists to meet the need. We know their feeling when Jesus wonders after their inventory, and suggests it might not be so thin after all. We are left either feeling our lack of resources keeping us from responding (again, there is only so much to go around in the terrarium) and the impossibility of it all can leave us wondering whether compassion is worth it in the end.

But here is the other point that I think we need in this. That Jesus invites us into God's compassionate response. The point isn't about what we have, or whether we can adequately respond to that which is going on around us, but rather that we invited into what God is doing with our response—paltry though it may be—to realize that which God is doing. That is one of the biggest challenges to the “world as we know it” way things are. We may well be met with

compassion, sure, but we temper it always with the practicality of what is possible given the constraints of the world as we know it. It is into that that Jesus comes to defy the world as we know it and build something new—the world as it really is within the hands of God. The point of our contribution and responding is not always to achieve the effective response that we think that we are entitled to, but rather to be faithful to the one who gave us the compassion to feel and the means to respond in the first place. When amplified and viewed through the lens of the loving God and Compassionate Christ, we may well be amazed at what can be achieved when we move beyond the impossibilities of what is, and rely instead on the possibilities of the living God. Our job is not necessarily to feed everyone effectively. But it is still our job to use what we have to do what we can in the name of the Christ who is the author of the work come what may. There is much of the life of the church that is constrained by the impossibilities of the present instead of being invited by the loving God in the waiting world.

Jesus invites us to feel, and in feeling respond, and in responding offer the thanksgiving to God and see what comes next. May we be ever surprised by the God who moves in our midst, inspiring us to embrace the world still being created. Amen.

*Silence As a gift*