

All he wanted was to be alone.

His beloved cousin, John—the one who had come before him, had baptized him—John was dead, killed by Herod at the request of his lover Herodias. For speaking truth to power, as they say. John had called out Herod for having his brother killed in order to have Herodias, and apparently he hit a nerve because when asked what she wanted most in the world Herodias said “the head of John on a platter.” And indeed John was put to death and displayed at the banquet Herod was hosting.

As anyone would after hearing such news, Jesus wanted to be alone. He gets in a boat and goes away to a deserted place, to take some time to grieve in private. Perhaps he’s also a little afraid—after all, he also is challenging the status quo of the Roman rule and the Pharisaic complicity. His life is in danger and he knows it.

But then the crowds show up. They too have heard the news, they too are dealing with shock and grief. So instead of the alone time he sought, it’s back to work.

The way Matthew tells it, Jesus goes back to work because he feels for these people. The NRSV translates the Greek as *compassion* but there is a sense that it isn’t just a detached sympathy but an empathy, that he feels their pain.

Several years ago Bill Clinton was called out for saying to his followers “I feel your pain.” Whether this is because people doubted that he could really know what they were going through; or perhaps that by saying this, by showing empathy, he was showing that he was weak. That seems to be the feeling today by many of our public leaders—if you show empathy for someone who is in trouble, who is poor, addicted, mentally ill, oppressed--then you’re weak, especially if you work to help them.

But what does it really mean to “feel for” someone? Empathy, as defined, *is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present.* In this case I think it means that Jesus has felt the pain of John’s loss and the crowd has felt the pain of John’s loss, and so he connects with them on that level. To me, there’s nothing weak in this process or ability; opening yourself to someone else’s emotions, particularly the negative ones such as pain, takes guts. There is a risk of opening yourself to suffering, a risk that you yourself might suffer.

But this is what Jesus does. He opens himself to those around him, taking on their pain and suffering, taking on their just cause, taking on their troubles. I don’t think you can heal someone—or help someone heal-- without having compassion for them; and the way Jesus worked meant going beyond compassion into true understanding.

He is there. The crowds are there. Imagine how they’re feeling: they’re all hurting, tired of being run over by the more powerful, tired of being on the margins, and Jesus is hurting as well and he could very well have used this opportunity to rally the troops (as D. Mark Davis says) into an army that could possibly have overthrown the Romans.

But he doesn’t do that. Instead he spends the day healing their sick and probably praying with them; I can picture him moving through the crowds, his disciples moving through the crowds as well—they have, after all, been given the power to heal the sick and drive out demons. At the end of the day the disciples are tired and they go to Jesus asking him to send the people away to eat.

And as tired as he must have been, as much as he must have been hurting, it’s time for another lesson for the disciples: *They don’t need to go away. You give them something to eat.* And the disciples groan to themselves, *what do you mean, Jesus, what do you mean we give them something to eat?* They say, *we don’t have anything, well, just 5 loaves of bread and a couple of fish—just*

enough for us. That's what they really mean, *we have just enough for us and none for anyone else. If we give this away we'll go hungry and Jesus! We've been working all day! We're hungry! There isn't enough for everyone!*

What a typical response. *There isn't enough for everyone.* We hear this on the news everyday: we can't afford healthcare for everyone. We can't afford a higher minimum wage. We can't afford more rehab beds and follow-up treatment for addicts. We can't afford food stamps for the hungry. (And oh, by the way, these people got themselves into their messes themselves, we *really* can't afford to help them out of their *own* messes.)

But what's left out of the equation is that this is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. If, with all of our wealth, we can't *afford* to care for our people, *all* of our people, even the ones who can't care for themselves, then who can? On top of that we claim to be a Christian nation, some of us do anyway; but if we don't have compassion, if we continue to allow the wealthiest go merrily along while allowing the poorest to suffer, how can we call ourselves Christian?

There are those who say it's more compassionate to make the poor fix their own problems, to learn to make better choices, that helping only leads to dependency. Maybe so. For every bad choice there is a consequence, and unless you've never made a bad choice you know that.

But how many people have to go bankrupt due to medical bills before we decide they deserve our help? How many people have to overdose before we decide that "Just Say No" doesn't work, but rehab and job programs and emotional support does? How many people have to choose between seeing their kids go hungry or being kicked out of their home because they can't afford rent and food even on a full time minimum wage salary, before we agree that people need to be paid a living wage?

At that point Jesus took the bread and fish from the disciples. He blessed the loaves and fish and broke them and gave them to the disciples, who began to pass them out to the crowds. And in the end everyone ate until they were satisfied and there were 12 baskets left over. Baskets overflowing with leftover, baskets full of the abundance of God's grace.

In our economy we're constantly told "there isn't enough." In God's economy there's always enough, more than enough. Whether you believe that this feeding was truly an instantaneous miracle—Jesus prays and bread appears—or whether you believe that somehow people opened their hearts and pockets and shared what they had (perhaps a greater miracle, given human nature) in God's economy there is always enough. What falls short sometimes are policies that allow those who are wealthy to gather more to themselves while those who are poor fall further and further behind. Worst of all, those who live on the margins are pitted against each other, abandoned to fight over what's left after the wealthy get theirs. Instead of baskets of abundance, left after everyone has enough, the leftovers are truly scraps that must feed the people who are left behind by the economic policies of our leaders.

And yes, we might be tired—tired of conflict, tired of hearing about the poor, tired of worrying about our own situations, let alone someone else's. We might also be afraid. But we have to realize that we're programmed to be afraid. To live believing a rhetoric of scarcity. Not enough money—we'll go broke if we (raise the minimum wage) (supplement wages with food stamps) (increase the number of rehab beds). Even Jesus was tired and afraid sometimes; it is his very humanness in this way that made him able to empathize with the crowd.

But what if we lived as if we believe what the Bible has to say, in verses like Isaiah 55:1 that we read a few minutes ago: *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.* What if we lived as Jesus did, believing in God's good abundance, abundance that is right in front of us? Abundance that happens when compassion leads to sharing rather than shaming. When we feel empathy rather than contempt for those who suffer from poverty, empathy that might make us suffer along with them but will help us understand more clearly how to help. And why to help. Because in God's economy no one goes hungry. All are satisfied. And at the end of the day, baskets