

Feed them: Matthew 14:13-21

How do you summon compassion when you're depleted?

by [Don C. Richter](#) in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

Jesus is in distress. He's still shaking the dust off his feet from that unhappy visit home when he learns that Herod has had his cousin John beheaded.

Jesus is spent. He withdraws to a deserted place. No wonder the disciples want to shield him, urge him to send the crowds away. They too must be dispirited. It's gratifying to help others when you're feeling good. But how do you summon compassion when you're depleted? How do you move from self-pity to self-giving, feed others while hunger gnaws at your own belly?

I've seen it happen. I watched a well-known church leader, exhausted after a full weekend of speeches and services, lay hands on a kneeling man to pray for his healing, right beside Baggage Claim #4 in the world's busiest airport. As the conveyor belt spit out luggage, the priest prayed calmly, confidently, blessing this man he had just met. After lifting the man to his feet and sending him on his way, the priest himself was revived, radiant, pulsing with new energy. He grabbed heavy bags twice his size, flung them on the luggage cart and practically sprinted toward the parking garage.

Ministry in Jesus' name takes such cruciform shape as it daily embodies his dying and rising. We die to death-conjuring ways, trusting that Jesus took death with him to the grave, where it stayed entombed when he rose. We who die and rise with Christ are lifted up even as we lift others. Cruciform ministry sets us free, makes us buoyant, nourishes us as we nourish others. Jesus' disciples see it happen when their teacher heals and feeds the multitude in that "deserted place." Stretched to his human limits, Jesus proclaims the goodness of God, makes tangible God's abundance, extravagance, prodigality. He calls forth more fish than the nets can hold, heals more people than the authorities allow and forgives more sins than stubborn lips confess.

Jesus miracles are not an in-your-face showcase for divine power. Instead, they herald Jesus' dying and rising, his relinquishment and resurrection. And the miracles invite followers in every age to join him in this cruciform way of life.

"You give them something to eat," Jesus instructs the disciples, anticipating their rejoinder: "We can't do that, Jesus. We've assessed available resources. There's not enough to go around—we're going to run out." Jesus' exchange with his disciples is no mere setup for the miraculous punch line. Disciples must frankly confront limits and die to their own power to transcend them. "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish," they tell Jesus. Then, handing him these gifts, they literally place the situation in his hands.

Looking to heaven and blessing the bread, Jesus reveals abundance where suspicion of scarcity has taken root. What seems not enough is blessed, broken and given back to the disciples for distribution. They do "give them something to eat" as Jesus requested, and it is more than enough to satisfy the crowd's hunger.

Abundance in Christ differs from our "supersize me" mentality. When I teach about practicing life at table, I ask learners to compare two meals which I set before them: a fast-food hamburger meal and the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper. I invite comparison in regard to portion size, number of servings per meal, packaging, production costs, consumer price, and whether the meal is standardized or varied according to the host culture. Groups readily observe that the hamburger meal is designed for private consumption and entails hidden environmental costs. Someone usually notes that fast food is at least *real* food, while communion is "only a symbolic meal."

Jesus' followers have long wondered what it means for Christians to view the Lord's Supper as the real meal, the template for practicing daily life at table. The early church began as a meal fellowship. House churches expanded their dining rooms to accommodate larger tables for feeding the faithful, especially the poor. At Paul's prodding, table fellowship included gentiles as well as Jews, extending Jesus' open eating ministry to all.

From time to time, Christians have literally taken to heart Jesus' command, "You give them something to eat." In an era of daily reports about a global food crisis, perhaps it is *kairos* time for the church to extend the table, to view the Lord's Supper not only as commemorating that Upper Room meal, but also as

remembering Jesus' feeding of the multitude.

My nine-year-old nephew belongs to an urban congregation that serves Sunday dinner each week after worship. Zach dines with family, friends and homeless people who find their way to the buffet line. When Zach asks the blessing at his family dinner table, he first thanks God for every dish on it. Then he asks God to be with people who live on the streets, to give them a place to sleep and food to eat. Homeless people are not an abstraction to Zach. He holds them in his heart as he prays a table blessing that binds gratitude and solidarity.

Agape Community Kitchen is a ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Westfield, New Jersey. Every Wednesday night youth and adults prepare and serve a nutritious meal to 250 people in the nearby town of Elizabeth. Young people started and continue to lead this ministry. What began as a hands-on service opportunity has become a weekly way-of-life priority that forms participants deeply in the practices of offering hospitality, breaking bread and seeking justice.

To the Agape volunteers ladling chili, to Zach and his congregation, to those first disciples and to us, Jesus says, "They need not go away. You feed them."