**YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT
(“THE HEAVENLY BANQUET”)**

December 2, 2018

Matthew 14:1-21
Key Verse 14:16 – “Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.””

Today, we are invited to join one of two banquets; the earthly banquet and the heavenly banquet. The earthly banquet is fully attended by the VIPs of this world. They are the ones who have risen to the highest heights in pursuit of what this world has to offer such power, fame, popularity, wealth and the freedom to live however you see fit no matter the consequences. And if you are prepared to give everything in that same pursuit, you too can join them. Sadly, in spite of all these things offered, no one who attends this banquet is ever satisfied. However, Jesus invites us to partake in His heavenly banquet free of charge. There, we get to taste the richness of His love, His grace and witness His power to provide all the things we need most in life, His power to quench our every thirst and satisfy our deepest desires. Furthermore, Jesus calls on us to serve all who come to His banquet with the same compassion and shepherd heart He has for us. It is a blessing offered to all but few get to experience it in all its fullness. Through this passage, let us accept His command to be His disciples and learn the deeper meaning of “*you* *give them something to eat*.”

Look at the first two verses; **“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him””** (1-2). Herod the tetrarch is also known as Herod Antipas. Although he is also referred to as King Herod elsewhere in the New Testament, he himself was never a true king but rather one of the four brothers who ruled over the region after the passing of their father, Herod the Great. But instead of a mighty ruler, here we see him acting as if he had seen a ghost! To explain why, Matthew expertly flashes back to an incident that took place just before the events of this passage.

John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus Christ. By baptizing people and preaching an uncompromising message of repentance, people turned their hearts back to God and everyone acknowledged John as a great prophet. He was a ray of light in this time of great spiritual darkness. John was bold enough to even challenge Herod for taking his brother’s wife Herodias as his own. In a move straight out of Game of Thrones, Herod and Herodias had divorced their respective spouses in favour of marrying each other both out of lust and political benefit. It was a scandal so great it threatened the balance of power in the region but John focused more on its spiritual implications. Just as the prophet Nathan rebuked King David for committing adultery with Bathsheba, John did the same to Herod. But while Herod refused to repent and was unable to do anything to John out of fear of the people, Herodias was plotting her revenge, just waiting for the perfect opportunity. As the old saying goes, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

The opportunity presented itself through a birthday banquet hosted by Herod himself. Mesmerized by the dancing of Herodias’ own daughter, Herod boastfully promised to give her anything she wanted, even up to half his kingdom (Mark 6:23)! To his horror, Herodias prompted her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist to be brought on a platter before her. Herod may have expected her to ask for diamonds, rubies or maybe a palace of her own. Instead, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. This shocked everyone. Who would ever dare ask a thing!? Herod had just made one devil of a promise and immediately tried looking for a way out, but because of his oath and fear of his guests, he had John beheaded, and his head presented to Herodias as a horrific party gift. John’s body was later carried off for burial by his grieving disciples and the terrible news conveyed to Jesus (9-12).

How did Jesus respond to this? Look at verse 13a. **“When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.”** Jesus would often withdraw to solitary places at very important times in His ministry. Most likely Jesus needed time alone in prayer to God and to mourn the loss of his dear cousin John, the one person in the whole world who had an idea of what Jesus was going through. In fact, by around this time next year, Jesus Himself would be tried and crucified for speaking out against the same wicked rulers and not compromising on the truth of God. Jesus needed time to silently reflect on all these things but that silence was swiftly shattered in verse 13b, **“Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.”** Most of us would not welcome such an intrusion even on our very best day much less in a time of unimaginable grief. He could have easily said “Not today. I’m going through a lot of things right now. Try again some other time.” It would have been the perfectly reasonable and expected thing to do in His situation. Instead, Jesus did a remarkable thing. Let us read verse 14, **“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.”**

Jesus had compassion on them. Jesus understood why they were there. These people who came to Him had all kinds of problems. Many were sick. Many had no jobs which is why they could have followed Jesus such an incredible distance on foot. Many more were hungry and homeless while others were spiritually lost. But Jesus saw them all as sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). Jesus felt all their agonies, their pain and their inner sorrow. Jesus deeply empathized with them and wanted to help them by any means. Compassion literally means “*suffer together*.” Rather than dwell on His own pain, Jesus turned His gaze outward at the pain of the gathered crowd, willingly entered their pain and suffered with them. People like Herod and the Pharisees couldn’t have cared less about them. With such leaders, people must have felt so alone and abandoned in their suffering. But in Jesus, they found someone who suffered together with them. Think about that. Jesus could have chosen to live in His eternal and splendour in heaven above, completely separate from our entire human experience yet He chose to become like one of us, out of His divine love for us (Philippians 2:6-8, Hebrews 4:15-16).

What did Jesus do in His compassion? He healed their sick. This must have communicated such comfort and love in a difficult time. Even as He was healing their physical sicknesses, His compassion healed their emotional and spiritual wounds at the same time. They felt the touch of God who welcomed them and was willing to be beside them when no one else would. Jesus always welcomes us when we come to Him. He understands us, heals us, and will make us whole. Thank You, Jesus!

Look at verse 15. **“As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”** As much as they crowd wanted to, they could not stay there forever and the disciples thought the best thing to do for them was to send them away so they could get themselves some food. Again, this was the reasonable and expected thing to do in their situation. To the disciples’ knowledge, no one had brought food even from amongst themselves. In the disciples’ thinking, they probably thought they were showing compassion for the crowd by pre-emptively suggesting this to Jesus. Yet Jesus had another idea in mind. Let us read the key verse for today’s passage. **“Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat””** (16). We have studied this passage numerous times so I don’t need to ask you to put yourself in the disciples’ shoes. Just think about all that goes into feeding the twenty-something people we have here every Sunday and multiply that by some number between 250 and 500! So why did Jesus ask them to do something they were obviously incapable of doing? There are 3 main lessons to be learned here.

First is that Jesus wanted His disciples to have a shepherd heart for God’s flock. When confronted with the looming issue of taking care of the crowd, the disciples instantly tried to push the problem onto somebody else. Let them be someone else’s problem. But Jesus wanted them to have genuine love and stewardship for people in need whether their needs were material or spiritual. As disciples of Jesus, we too are called to bear the burdens of others as our own in the same way Jesus bears with ours (Matthew 11:28-30).

Second is that Jesus works with whatever is brought before Him. Look at verse 17, **““We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.”** After scouring the entire crowd, all they had to show for it was a small boy’s lunch of five loaves and two small fish. Yet Jesus graciously received this offering (19). He gave thanks to God for what seemed so little yet that one small meal was able to feed every one there till they were fully satisfied with twelve basketfuls left over (20). Often, we hesitate to bring whatever we have to God for we think it is too small or insignificant. We feel that maybe once we become someone great in life or make Bill Gate’s or Jeff Bezos’ money only then can we be useful to God. But as the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, God’s magnificence is best displayed through the small things, the foolish things, the things regular people see as having no value for it is God who works mightily through them and makes them beautiful.

Yet there is one thing that is required before we can even apply the first two lessons… and that is a genuine faith in Jesus. Specifically, faith in Jesus displayed through prayer. Hebrews 11:1 proclaims, **“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”** This is especially true with prayer. Jesus Himself declares, **“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”** (Mark 11:25). So why do we feel that our prayers largely go unanswered? One of the reasons is that we try to make “realistic” prayers, i.e., make our prayer so small that we pray for things we could “realistically” accomplish on our own with no need for any help from God. It’s an oxymoronic statement! Why pray for what you already have or what you can get by your own strength and ability? To make matters worse, when we are confronted with something beyond our capabilities, we unknowingly put those same limitations on God (i.e. if I can’t do it, then God probably can’t either. Doesn’t God help those who help themselves?). An example of this is our prayer to raise 100 000 missionaries by 2041. Because we spend all our time thinking about what limits us such as only having around ~10 000 regular SWS attendees, already taking over 50 years to only grow this far, people leaving for other ministries, etc, we instantly close off any door for God to work by limiting Him with our own limits. In order for us to go beyond these limits we need to stop thinking of how big our problems are and start thinking of how God even bigger and greater compared to all our problems!

A great example of when compassion crosses paths with an absolute trust in the power of prayer comes in the form of George Mueller. He was a minister in England in the 19th Century and a man of great compassion who gave his life to serve orphans. Horrified by the slave-like conditions children were forced into during that time, George wanted to build a place they could call home. But as a poor German immigrant, he had no money. It seemed impossible but he prayed to God for the means to open up an orphanage starting from a humble prayer for £40. God gave him £50. Then when he needed more, he prayed again, and again God provided. One famous account is of how he and the children sat at the table with no food whatsoever. Yet George and the children prayed again, trusting in God’s providence. Their prayer was interrupted when a baker knocked on their door offering free bread as there had been a fire at the bakery. Soon afterwards, the milkman knocked on their door offering them free milk because his cart had broken down right in front of the orphanage. George continued this pattern of prayer all throughout his time running the orphanage, never once asking people for money, advertising for fundraising or going into debt - and God came through every time. Throughout George Mueller’s lifetime and though he died penniless, close to a million pounds (125 million pounds by today’s standard) came and went through his hands to forever change the lives of over 10,000 orphans under his care. He merely took whatever he received from God, gave thanks and went out to feed God’s children in the same way Jesus instructed His disciples to do on that mountainside.

In conclusion, Jesus commands us as His disciples, “you give them something to eat.” It is our life’s mission to care for all those the Good Lord sends our way and pour out His love upon them through acts of genuine compassion. No matter what way Jesus asks you to display this in your own life, let us be ready to offer ourselves to do His great work just as we are. And in all these things, let us always give thanks to Him as we pass on all that He has richly blessed us with.