**Gospel**: Matthew 14:13-21

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. 14When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15When 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.” 16Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” 17They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” 18And he said, “Bring them here to me.” 19Then 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. 20And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

**Message**: Mercy in the Form of Bread

The Hebrews, taken into exile in Babylon, were those comprising the wealthy, the well-educated, philosophers, artisans, the political leaders, the religious elite. Take these out of the picture and the conquered area is easier to manage/control. Those of the first- generation exiles, who were relocated to Babylon, even though it was a place of high culture and vibrant consumerism, were in a deserted place, missing the life of their homeland and the familiar routine—at first. However, as we know if you have ever just traveled for vacation (or relocated for jobs or stranded due to weather or adjusted for COVID), it doesn’t take long before the new routine/new way of doing is established. Whether you rent a cottage, new home or set up a campsite, you get the place in working order then work on the itinerary. Where do we go? What do we do & when? The exiles had to have experienced this on a much grander scale. They were not going to be gone for the usual two weeks with pay. Those left behind may have had similar experiences of “what do we do now?” (or just continued eeking out a living) I wonder how many actually asked God, “What now?”

There were, as we know, complaints among the Hebrews, of God having abandoned them—*how can we sing a song of Zion in a foreign land*. Equally very possible were people, either those remaining in Judah or those in Babylon, who hunkered in after a while and started to make a life for themselves. Those who remained in Judah in agriculture, those in Babylon being absorbed/integrated into the lavish culture, used their skills and worked for their own survival and even for the good of the city. Yes, there are marvelous stories of those who kept the faith alive not bending to the religious demands of the emperor. But, among the many as time passed and life went on, the question had to be asked, “who, then, abandoned whom?” Have you ever been in such a dire situation (your thoughts on 9/11 perhaps or Ukranians) that you felt God had abandoned you? We see every day, people who try to exist without God. Some have never been taught. Some are quite well-off depending on wealth for security and peace of mind; others are incredibly poor. All are poor in spirit. No wonder there are questions as to the existence of God or just a denial of God entirely. They live in a deserted place: one alone.

Then there is that butterfly that flaps its wings in the Amazon rain forest setting off a wind storm on another continent. A new emperor has made the economic decision that the Hebrews can return to their home land. Make that country prosper, so they can pay tribute to the empire. It’s a money-maker! They are still facing an uncertain future in a country once their own, but having changed. God, however, is calling “Come to me! Live in My abundance.” The exiles return, rebuild the city, restore the economy. What is the political environment? Even though a high confectionary may have been achieved, people were still starving. Over time, the Law, that was to point to ways of serving and obeying God and caring for neighbor, evolved into a rigid religious system that bore little resemblance to a faith-filled lifestyle. People were still oppressed, now by their own. The weak were not protected; greed was flourishing; walls dividing socio-economic classes were firmly established; illness, poverty, unemployment, mourning loss were rampant and self-inflicted.

God continues to make a way out of no way. God’s power, the power of love, is integral to faith. JESUS, hearing of John’s death, went to a deserted place. There are times when one needs to be alone with God to talk, to process events of upheaval and loss, to gain direction—and to give thanks. However, there are others whose needs are greater than yours, and you are called to action before you get started on your agenda. Jesus saw the crowd and had compassion for them. He enacted mercy—**kindness in excess of what may be expected**. What were they expecting? What do you expect from Jesus? Putting aside his own feelings, he healed the sick in body, mind and spirit. This is the kingdom of God. Compassion and mercy flow outward from one person at a time, penetrating, infiltrating, and expanding like that bit of yeast in the dough.

As it grew late, the disciples suggested Jesus dismiss them to go get some food. “You feed them.” We tend to fixate on the miracle itself. What are the mechanics of the event? Did it actually happen? How might it have happened? Were there really 5000+ people? The **main focus** here, however, is **Jesus’ prayer**. He looked to heaven, a physical gesture in a public display of faith, completely dependent on and grateful to God. Jesus’ mission is motivated by compassion for all, not just the outcast, the least, lost and lonely. The gesture is to motivate the wealthy and powerful as well to come to God and serve in acts of kindness beyond what might be expected. Jesus, **first**, blesses God, offering praise, and moves to thanksgiving for all that has gone before and all that is about to be. His totally trusts that God does what God promises, often in ways we cannot envision. We think, *I am only one person; what can I possibly do* to change anything? Jesus offers what little we humans have to be allied with God’s powers and abundance. Without God, we are helpless. (Even emperors without their knowledge, are God’s instruments.) Humble humans, moved by compassion, trust in God’s higher grace. What meager faith we possess, allows God’s abundance to nourish our souls with health, truth, peace of mind and security.

Mercy in the form of bread (simple, ordinary elements) leads to a divinely inspired life that can be experienced only through the reality of our biological existence. **This** is the kingdom that has come near. The kingdom does not lie exclusively in life beyond this earthly sojourn. Recognize the difference between a mental concept (the Law) and a living faith in living God. Act on it. We may have some glimmer of what life after death may entail, but NOW is the kingdom come near, when we can offer what little “bread” we might have in material goods or physical capabilities or mental capacity to offer kindness in excess of what may be expected. Trust in God and God’s mercy to abound beyond all expectation. Bodies are fed, nourished and healed; homes are established; spirits are uplifted and supported with love; resources are shared; walls are dismantled giving opportunity to experience the transformative power of grace from a little bit of bread. The Lord be with you in abundance. Amen.

**Prayers of the People**: For these that weigh on our hearts, we bow to You, God of us all, giver of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grant according to the riches of your glory that all may be strengthened with the might of your Spirit, that Christ dwells in our hearts by faith that moves mountains, that we are rooted and grounded in love, able to comprehend the breadth, length, depth and height of your compassion given through Jesus Christ. To the power that works in us to do in exceeding abundance, to God be the glory. Amen.

**Benediction**: The peace that passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus the Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit be among us and remain with us always. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen

**Old Testament**: Isaiah 55:1-5

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. 3Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

**New Testament**: Romans 9:1-5

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— 2I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. 4They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**: You have given so much to us; give one thing more: a grateful heart for Christ’s sake. Amen.