

We cannot hear the emotion within their reply, but it is surely there when Jesus tells His disciples, “*You give them something to eat.*” Their jaws would have dropped. Their eyes would have opened wide in shock. Surely Jesus cannot be serious. It would cost well over half a year’s salary to feed all these people. Not to mention the time and effort, and all the wagons it would take, to go and buy the food and bring it all back. No, the only option is what they have already suggested. “*Send them away to...buy themselves something to eat.*”

Now, you and I have the luxury of hearing this story long after it happened. So, it is difficult for us to actually place ourselves in the shoes of these disciples. From our vantage point we can chide the disciples: “Well, they should have known that Jesus could perform a miracle to feed that large crowd of people. Jesus can do anything.” Yet it is not Jesus’ almighty power that His disciples should have considered. Rather, it is His stomach. Yes, His stomach.

I’m not saying that Jesus was hungry too. Though surely He was. I am saying that had His disciples known what was in Jesus’ stomach, His gut, and had they known the Old Testament well, they would not have been so shocked when He told them, “*You give them something to eat.*”

Let’s back up a few hours. When Jesus and His disciples stepped out of the boat in that desolate place, “*He saw a great crowd,*” it says, “*and He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*” The Greek word for the compassion Jesus has is a severe pain in His gut, His stomach. It is pure agony, so deep is His pain. This is the compassion He feels for the great crowd. And why? “*Because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*”

But they did have rabbis teaching them, didn’t they? The people surely assembled in the synagogues on the sabbath to be taught, right? So how were they like sheep without a shepherd?

Well, what were they taught? Not the Gospel of salvation. They were taught works-righteousness. They were directed to themselves, to their own good works. This was the way of the scribes and Pharisees. They taught the Scriptures, but they taught them wrongly. The people were directed to themselves, to their way of life as the way of salvation. So, they truly were like sheep without a shepherd.

No wonder it says that Jesus “*began to teach them many things.*” Hour after hour He taught them. And His teaching is true. He teaches the Scriptures rightly. His teaching is life and salvation. Jesus, in all of His teaching, directs poor sinners away from themselves to Him, to He who is our Righteousness, the way of eternal life.

“*Woe to the shepherds,*” says Jeremiah in our first reading, “*who destroy and scatter the sheep!*” But Jesus does the opposite. He saves the sheep, and He gathers the sheep. This is the teaching of Jesus. It is what He does here week after week. He is saving you, His sheep, by His teaching. And He is gathering you together.

And then we’re told that it “*grew late.*” And what great idea do the disciples have? “*Send them away to...buy themselves something to eat.*”

Can't the disciples hear Jeremiah's words ringing in their ears? "*Woe to the shepherds who...scatter the sheep... You have scattered My flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them!*"

How dare the disciples send the people away! This is what God condemns through His prophet Jeremiah. For hours Jesus was directing the people away from themselves to Him. Now the disciples want to do just the opposite and direct the people away from Jesus to themselves. No! This is not compassion. This is the way of the scribes and Pharisees. But it is not Jesus' way. "*You give them something to eat.*"

"*Feed My sheep,*" Jesus tells Peter after His resurrection. "*Feed My sheep,*" He tells His pastors today. "You, Pastor Bell, *give them something to eat.*"

Four hours, well, maybe not hours...for minutes Jesus teaches you, His sheep, through the sermon. And then He directs me to give you something to eat. But not just anything. The food He has prepared. He prepared this food by suffering and dying on a cross. And here, with His blessing, He feeds you His very body and blood in His own Sacrament. By doing this, He keeps directing you away from yourselves to Him who is your Righteousness.

Because here is what we do. We keep wanting to focus upon ourselves. We want to judge ourselves by our way of life. Yet this destroys us and scatters us away from Jesus. When we keep the focus on ourselves, either we think we are great, which is a lie, or we think we are wretched and miserable, which is true, but unless we are turned out from ourselves to Jesus, we will despair.

It's all about Jesus and His compassion. Yes, His compassion for you. Not because you are sheep without a shepherd, but because you and I love to wander away from our Shepherd. We scatter ourselves. We destroy ourselves.

Friend, fear not. The agony Jesus has for you in His gut is so great because His love for you is so great. His teaching is true and is for you. And what He teaches is that, for you He died. For your sinfulness. You are forgiven. No matter how scattered you are; no matter how much you have destroyed yourself, He forgives you. He forgives you. He saves you. And He gathers you here to Himself with all His other sheep. And here He gives you something to eat – the food of life. Food you could never buy for yourself. But food that He freely gives to you. Amen.