

“Connecting With God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 21, 2026

*A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our
Neighbors, and Ourselves: Week Three*

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Philippians 4:4-9

Mark 6:30-47

The feeding of the multitudes by Jesus is the only story of a miracle that is included in all four gospels; offering us a clue that it was a very important memory for the early church.

After seeing the crowd, Jesus felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The disciples were skeptical that their small supply of food could satisfy such a large crowd, but Jesus mercifully provides a meal that even included leftovers. While it is easy to emphasize the miracle, we often overlook the sympathy that literally moves Jesus to act. The simple fact that Jesus did not send the people away is remarkable. Instead of commanding them to leave, he orders them to stay and sit down on the grass.

The world of the first-century Roman Empire was marked by significant inequalities concerning food access. Many people struggled daily and seasonally to find adequate food and nutrition. The empire was very hierarchical with a small group of ruling elites who enjoyed an abundant variety and good quality of food. But most of the population lived at or below levels of subsistence. This lack of food was just one of the ways people experienced injustice within this power disparity. It is also one of the reasons we see so many sick people in the gospels. Diseases of deprivation and contagion were rife.¹

Jesus’ compassion compels him to take action. So, too, it should be with us. While we may feel sympathy for someone, how often does the emotion result in action? Many churches use their kitchens to provide meals to those in need; many serve as collection sites for all kinds of needed commodities to help the poor. How can and do we contribute to these efforts? Your offering can be the “little” resources (like the loaves and fish) that, when blessed and added with others, can bring forth an increase. Planting gardens, giving

¹ Warren Carter from *WorkingPreacher.com*

of our excess, and advocating for and supporting programs and funding that will help to feed the hungry are all ways that we can bring forth God's kingdom on the earth.

After the apostles had returned and relayed to Jesus "all they had done and taught" on their mission, he recognizes their need for rest, and calls them to "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." They cross the Sea of Galilee in a boat, but they do not get the rest that Jesus prescribes for them, because many people "saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them."

Then, after the feeding of the multitudes was finished, Jesus sent his disciples on a boat ahead of him, so that he could go up the mountain, alone, to pray.

So far, in the course of this *Curriculum of Love*, we have discussed how, if Jesus really is someone we emulate, then we should pay attention to his habits. While he surely had a deep connection with God from birth, he was also human and needed to nurture that relationship. Especially in the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus going away by himself to pray quite often. While Jesus also went to synagogues and spoke of God constantly, these are no substitutes for finding solitude, being in nature, and spending time in prayer. He needed this personal time alone to experience and re-align with God.²

While many people these days claim to be *spiritual but not religious*, I wonder, in our modern society, how well we understand what it means to have a healthy and robust spiritual life? Is it going to church? Is it reading the Bible? Is it meditative prayer? Is it finding someone to be your spiritual guide?

Since we don't have a very clear idea of what practicing this spiritual life might entail, many tend to adapt a secular sense of spirituality and correlate its practice with the daily stuff that we already love to do; such as cooking, reading, walking the dog, and so on. On the other hand, some Christians think that spirituality is only about works of justice and throw themselves into those issues and activities they hope will change the world and themselves. Few of us seem to understand that spiritual disciplines actually involve attempts connect to and listen for God.

Jesus surely craved solitude so he could connect in that way. It wasn't just a breather to get away from people, or even a chance to remind himself of his mission, it was a time to feel the presence of God in and around him.

² Siri Stroman, *A Curriculum of Love*

Jesus is also attentive to the practices of his disciples and is aware of this spiritual push and pull that we all go through daily. We can easily fall into the cosmetic treatments of spiritual lotions, lustrous prayers, and healing baths and believe that these kinds of self-care are spiritual acts. But we can also fall into the trap of working hard for a cause of justice without tending to our spiritual and emotional needs. Maybe this latter group is the one Jesus is concerned with and talking to here: those who do not stop to think, to wonder, to pay attention, and to pray. To these, Jesus says, “come away to deserted place...and rest a while.”

The desert, the wilderness space, is where God led and cared for the Hebrew people after they escaped from slavery in Egypt. There, God fed them and formed them into a new people. The desert is also where Jesus, after being baptized by John in the Jordan River, retreated and fasted for forty days, facing temptations and building his resolve for the mission that lay ahead.

In the desert – whether sandy or grassy, mountain or plain – we can gain a sense of ourselves again. There is no noise apart from the wind and whatever noise we make; no presence besides our own and our memories; no company besides the plants and animals.

In the desert, there can be no peace if our own heart is not at peace. In the desert we seek to control our minds in order to free ourselves from the strong grips of anxiety, fear, and endless movement. In the desert, we hear the silence we produce; we take it back from our cellphones, background noise, and rushed lives. To know ourselves in the desert is, therefore, to know better the work we do in the world.

And the world is in such a precarious situation that we need constant movement in and out of the desert that a solid spirituality provides. These spiritual practices are important because our presence and work as Christians in the world are fundamental to the lives of those others who surround us, who we are called to love. We see those who are hungry, sick, homeless, and poor. We see those who are lonely or struggling with loss. We see children, the elderly, and differently abled persons who need our care.

We have so much to do, as Jesus says. At times, even Jesus couldn't stop. His heart was driven by compassion. But – and this is something some of us really need to hear – Jesus knew that he needed to stop. Nobody can always keep running and continue to do things without stopping.

Our task is to be attentive to all that is crying out for our attention and demanding our care: hungry human beings from all parts of our lives and the earth that is struggling

under the weight of our destructive ways. As people of God, we are called to see and discern what God is asking us to do.

In the same way, Jesus is telling us that we sometimes have to pause and pay attention to our hearts, our movements, and to how we are living our lives. Without a strong spiritual life – one oriented by spiritual practices of prayer and meditation, of pause and withdrawal – we cannot do the work we need to do and cannot be what we are called to be. A heart without action is ineffective, but an action without heart is empty.³

It should probably not surprise us that this miracle of feeding multitudes occurs in a deserted place – an empty location, seemingly without sufficient resources – prompting the disciples to suggest that Jesus send the people away so that they might find something to eat.

For, as Presbyterian pastor and teacher Tom Long puts it:

The church is always in the desert, the place where it cannot rely on its own resources, which are few. The church is hungry itself and is surrounded by a world of deep cravings, people who are lonely, disoriented, and poor in many different ways.

Against the savage realities of human need, the church sees only small numbers on the membership rolls and in the mission budget. It is no wonder, then, that the church joins the disciples in crying out, “This is a desert. Send the crowds away to fend for themselves.”⁴

But Jesus is ever the teacher and there is a lesson for the disciples – and the church – to learn: God is compassionate and abundantly able to provide. With desperate and hungry people all around, Jesus turns – then and now – to his followers and speaks what is either a cruel joke or divine humor: “You give them something to eat.”

And the disciples, fully aware that their own resources are no match for the magnitude of the need, nonetheless trust this jest is divine and obey Jesus. Indeed, the image of the disciples, moving among the now nourished multitudes, lugging twelve baskets of leftovers back to their compassionate Lord, is enough to provoke joyous laughter in the reader and, perhaps, even in heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Claudio Carvalles in *WorkingPreacher.com*

⁴ Tom Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*