

## Matthew 14 God's Economic System

Have you ever thought about how much of our scripture tells us that we have got it all wrong when it comes to the systems we use to organize our lives? How you ever thought that what God proposes for our being able to live an abundant life consists of a way of life at the opposite end of the spectrum to the processes and institutions we have established? Today our selected readings seem to be describing just such an economic system as God proposes. Of course, you only have to go a little further in Isaiah 55 to understand why we don't want to put God's proposal for organizing resources into effect within our way of doing economics. Through Isaiah God says: "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." Just after God has seemingly invited all to come and eat what God provides at NO cost we find Isaiah 55: 8-9 where we read: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts your thoughts." One thing we often don't realize is these verses are not an invitation so much as a command—an imperative call to turn to God and to God's ways. Sometimes we like to take what we read in Scripture literally—God loves us. God forgive us. God sent Jesus his only son to redeem us. These are some of those things when taken literally give us hope and comfort. But when God invites all to come and eat at no cost, we feel that he must be talking about receiving spiritual nourishment. "Why 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. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." We often fail to consider that God is not only talking about turning to God and not idols, but is also talking about obedience to God's ways—those ways that are higher than our own. Living into those ways is the path to life. Within the Pentateuch, those first five books of the Hebrew Scripture, the covenant people were given many commands and ordinances which were designed to provide an abundant community life for all the people based on justice; designed for strong community relationships which left no one without a place of safety within the community. What God is promising through these verses begins with images of sustenance free and abundant for all. These verses depict God's outrageous abundance which is the center of the everlasting covenant. These verses also show us through the verbs used, imperatives though they are, that the command issued also indicated an action by the one commanded. The action commanded is participation in embracing this vision of how God desires the world to live—to follow God's ways which are life-giving. God here also issues an indictment against those people of the covenant...they are spending money on that which is not bread and laboring for things which do not satisfy them. Thinking of these verses in spiritual terms is not an error, we often try to substitute material things for those that last. But God's vision for humanity included from the beginning the imperative that we should care for one another; that humans live in communities which care for one another. That caring community is a portion of the bread that is good and which satisfies a hunger deeper than that obtained by eating a meal, no matter how rich. Through our passage from Matthew this morning we get another look at God's economic system. This passage begins as Jesus tries to

get away from the crowds which have begun gathering around him—he and the disciples have gotten in a boat and gone to what is described as a deserted place. Getting away hasn't worked out all that smoothly because when he comes ashore there is a great crowd awaiting him. We are not given an indication of the hour when Jesus alights from the boat; what we are told is that Jesus immediately had compassion on them and cured their sick. With Jesus compassion leads to action. How long this healing goes on we don't know, but the disciples approach Jesus when it is evening. They remind Jesus that they are in a deserted place and the hour is late. No nearby restaurants or inns, so the disciples anticipating a problem with nourishment suggest that Jesus dismiss the crowd—"send the crowds away to that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." In our model for economic transactions that seems a considerate thing for the disciples to do for the crowd. Send them away so that they can purchase what they need for sustenance. Jesus doesn't accept this solution. Jesus says to the disciples: "They need not go away...and then says to the disciples: "**You** give them something to eat." When I envision this scene it see total shock on the faces of the disciples as they exclaim. "What! You Want us to do What!." This narrative appears in all of the gospels with some variations on the details. In Matthew there is no crowd search to locate a young boy with two fish and five loaves—but we are told that is what the disciples know that they have available. They look at the crowd of 5,000 men not counting women and children and reply, "We have **nothing here** but five loaves and two fish"—food is scarce in this deserted place, we don't have enough for all these people. And Jesus then requests that the available resources be placed in his hands. The crowd, instead of being sent away is told to sit down on the grass. What happens next in this story has an echo in the meal that we will partake of in a few minutes. Jesus takes the bread and fish, looks up to heaven and blesses then breaks the loaves. There is no outcry that a massive amount of food has just appeared. Instead we are told the broken pieces are given to the disciples who then give them to the crowd—and as Matthew ends the narration: "And all ate and were filled"; not just all were given something—they were filled—they were given enough to satisfy. As if that were not amazing enough, the disciples again move through the crowd "and they took up what we left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. The disciples saw limited resources, Jesus intervened and abundance happened—there was more than enough for all. This passage contains two specific messages for us: God has compassion which encompasses all and God expects us to act in the face of need, just as he told the disciples to act. Through the disciples, God's compassion was enacted as they distributed food to the crowd. This compassion was unique to the world in which they lived—the Roman and pagan gods of the times were considered dispassionate, and in fact were notorious for using humans as playthings; at best these deities took the side of the rich and powerful sanctioning their exploitation of the poor. And yet here, Jesus renews, embodies, and fulfills the consistent call of the God of Israel to feed the hungry. Make no mistake, these folks weren't just hungry because for a day they had gathered around Jesus in a deserted place. Food "scarcity" wasn't only known to them on this day, it was rampant as a mean of political will and control. Even if they hadn't been in a deserted place, those folks likely would not have had the coin to purchase food. The disciples would have known that. And so Jesus tells his disciples to get over their callous self-concern for their own meal and feed the crowd themselves. Here Jesus uses the disciples, even when they would rather look after themselves, to tend to the needs of these thousands of men, women and children. Using words and actions

which foreshadow the Last Supper and our sacrament of Communion, Matthew depicts what happens when you move from a world-view of scarcity—we have nothing but five loaves and fishes—to one of abundance—“thank you, God, for these five loaves and two fish.” Whatever their skepticism, or doubt, or self-preoccupation, the disciples are caught up in Jesus’ words of abundance and gratitude and go distribute what they have and see with wonder and joy that “all ate and were filled.” In today’s world, God still cares deeply and passionately for those who are most vulnerable—the poor, the immigrant, the hungry—and God continues to use us to care for them, to consider what we have not in terms of scarcity but in terms of the potential to participate in God’s compassionate kingdom here and now, looking to expand God’s reign of justice and caring for all. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.