

I love Wichita. I love the sense of community one feels when walking down the street and meeting a complete stranger, but smiling and saying, “hi,” anyway, because we’re from Wichita and hey, it’s what we do. (When my daughter went on a band trip to Chicago in high school, I wanted to be sure and let her know that this greeting of strangers on the street is strictly a Wichita phenomenon. I wasn’t sure exactly how it would go over in Chicago.)

I came across a news story a couple of weeks ago which made me feel particularly proud to live in Wichita. The story can be found on KWCH’s website; posted on July 20th. It details a program the Wichita Transit System has put in place to make transportation available to people who live in food deserts in Wichita. They are piloting the program in an area bordered by Oliver and Hydraulic, from ninth street to twenty-fourth street. The service, called “Point to Point” provides people with a round trip ride to a grocery store on a Wichita transit bus.

Food deserts are areas of the city which are underserved by supermarkets or grocery stores. These food deserts make it difficult for the people living in the area to access fresh fruits and vegetables, since most of the shopping available is in convenience stores. The Health and Wellness Coalition of Wichita published the results of a study they did concerning food deserts in Wichita in 2013. Part of this report focused on price differences in areas throughout Wichita. What the study found was that because of the need for certain areas of town to shop almost exclusively in convenience stores, “some of the most affluent ZIP codes have the lowest food prices while some of the lowest income ZIP codes have the highest food prices.” The study goes on to state, “With just over a quarter of Wichita’s population living in food deserts, education about the inequalities caused by these deserts is essential to developing community solutions.”

Food inequality is obviously not limited to Wichita, neither is it a new problem. The crowds in our text today, however, were not necessarily lacking in food because of a permanent economic situation, but because of their intent to stay close to Jesus.

Each of the Gospel writers relates this story: Mark 6:35-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-14, and of course, today’s passage in Matthew. But my preconceptions of this story based on the different Gospel accounts, led to some surprises when I really focused on this particular passage.

One of the risks I run when reading a familiar passage is that I tend to read it according to what I *think* the passage is saying, rather than what the passage is *actually* saying. This is the case with the passage at hand this morning. This passage is so familiar, that we may miss out on looking at some of the trees for the view of the forest. For this reason, I’d like to take some time unpacking the story.

The story starts off with Jesus going off by himself to a deserted place. The first verse tells us that this passage is a continuation of a previous narrative. “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” When Jesus heard *what*? The passage before our passage this morning tells about when Jesus heard about the gruesome and grisly death of John the Baptist from his disciples. After hearing a story like that, I can think of a lot of reasons why Jesus would want to withdraw especially when, according to the beginning of this chapter, Herod thought Jesus was a reincarnation of John the Baptist.

Then, “when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.” What had the crowds heard? Had they heard that Jesus had gotten into a boat and was rowing across the sea by himself? So, in order to be near him, they gathered on the far shore and were waiting for him when he arrived. Instead of finding solitude, Jesus found a crowd of needy people; needing to be healed by Jesus, needing to just be close to Jesus. And, seeing them, Jesus was filled with compassion for them and began healing them.

Suddenly, the disciples are in the picture. Where did they come from? Have they been here the whole time? Did they come in the boat with Jesus? Did they follow along with the crowds, waiting for Jesus on the shore? Or are they just now making their way to where Jesus is ministering to the crowd? It’s getting dark, the people are getting hungry and the disciples show up to tell Jesus to dismiss the crowd so they can go into town and buy themselves something to eat. The disciples are making the people take responsibility for their own hunger. Send them away, let them go buy something to feed themselves. The disciples’ reaction is not unusual for those of us who are accustomed to a narrative of independence and individuality. No one invited these people here, no one was responsible for providing food for them. Let them as individuals and families take responsibility for themselves and go into town and buy themselves something to eat.

But Jesus’ reaction challenges that mentality. Jesus puts the responsibility of feeding the crowd right back on the disciples, “you give them something to eat.” The disciples produce five loaves of bread and two fish, though Matthew doesn’t explain where this food comes from. Did the disciples themselves bring it with them? Were they planning to give it to Jesus, knowing that he probably had had nothing to eat for supper? Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks the bread and gives it to his disciples. It’s important to note here that these are the same actions Jesus uses at the Last Supper: taking, blessing, breaking, giving.

What struck me for the first time in reading this passage is the next action, Jesus gave the food to the disciples so the disciples could distribute the food to the crowd. My own tendency to read what I thought was there rather than what was actually there made me miss this nuance. Jesus had given the responsibility for feeding the crowd to the disciples, and then helped them to fulfill that responsibility by providing them with the means to do it. Even out of their meager rations comes abundance.

There are different interpretations to this text. There are those that say that this story is an example of a physical miracle performed by Jesus; physically multiplying the food that was available to make enough for all those who were in attendance. Some believe that the story is likened to when God fed the children of Israel manna in the desert. There are scholars that say that the feeding is an enactment of a Eucharistic meal. And there are those that say that the people gave of their own sources of food when they saw the willingness on the part of the disciples to share what little they had. I have no problem with believing that this passage is all of these things, being True, (with a capital T) on many levels all at once. It’s a story that continues to be true today, on many levels.

We don’t know the exact number of people in the crowd. Matthew just tells us that there were 5,000 men, besides women and children. Even if there were only 6,000 people there, and 12 disciples distributing food, that means that each disciple gave food to 500 people. Can you imagine encountering 500 people so closely that you could hand them food – one after another, after another? Walking through the crowd, making your way through men and women and children; those who came alone and those who came in families; the very old and the very young? This was not just a miracle to feed a group of people who had stayed to be near Jesus. This was a lesson to the disciples in encountering people; to see each one exactly as they were in that moment. This was not just a faceless crowd, these were 500 people who needed to be given food by *you*.

How do we truly encounter those around us? What does it mean to be close enough to someone to look into their eyes, and hand them a piece of bread? How does God work miracles through us in our own community?

The Wichita Transit system has found a way to encounter some of the needy in our community. They are meeting them right where they are and providing them with a solution to meet their needs – a trip to the grocery store. It is a perfect example of a community-based solution to a community-based problem. And these solutions abound in communities. Solutions provided by faith-based and community-based organizations.

The crowd in this passage didn't need to go to the villages for food. They remained together as a crowd – as a community, and together they were fed, “and were filled,” Matthew says, and there was an abundance of food, twelve baskets full of leftovers. All because the disciples took what God had given them, and Jesus had blessed, and distributed it to all those in need.