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First Congregational UCC, Boulder
Sermon for World Communion Sunday

Feeding the 5000 Plus
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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The Bible is full of stories about food. There's a Passover recipe for roast lamb inserted partway through Exodus, and a little later manna falls from heaven to feed the Israelites in the wilderness. Elijah eats with ravens and Ruth gleanes grain from the fields. Jesus sits down with anyone who is willing to set an extra plate and Paul writes a lot of letters to the early church about their table manners.

Jesus is also known for hosting a feast or two. The feeding of the 5000, for instance, is one of the few stories about him, and the only story of a miracle, that made it into all four Gospels. Table fellowship is central to his ministry, so important that Jesus is reported to have said, "I am the Bread of Life." Whenever two or three are gathered, or twelve, or five thousand and more, Jesus graciously extends his arms and says, "It's time to eat."

Here in the 14th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, there are two meals. Jesus isn't invited to the first one. He hears about it later. And frankly, it's such a disturbing scene, I'm sure we'd prefer to skip it too. But Matthew seems to set the meals side by side for a reason. Certainly, the contrast between the two is stark.

The first one is a birthday party for King Herod. All the rich and the royal are present for this feast. In just a few short verses, however, the party takes a very bad turn. In no time at all, the festivities dissolve into debauchery. Things quickly get out of hand. Impulsively, in his jovial mood, Herod makes a deal with his daughter to grant her any wish. She is being manipulated by others, but she manages to back Herod into a corner anyway. She requests the death of John the Baptist who happens to be chained up in a dark room in the floors below.

Herod doesn't want this. He doesn't want it. He wants no conflict, no confrontation, no stirring up of his subjects. But rather than lose face in front of all his powerful guests, he orders the brutal killing. In one of the most gruesome scenes in Scripture, John's head is placed on a platter and is paraded around the banquet hall.

When Jesus receives word about what has just happened, he leaves town. Matthew says, he withdraws, gets into a boat by himself and he sails away to a deserted place. We can imagine why he feels the need to get away. John the Baptist, after all, is the one who had come to prepare the way for Jesus. Their ministries are intertwined and if John has been killed, surely Jesus knows it's likely he will be next. John the Baptist is also his cousin and the report of his grisly death could only have left him deeply grieved. So he goes to a deserted place to be alone.

We know what it's like to grieve too. There isn't any of us who has not suffered the loss of someone or something precious to us – the loss of someone dear to us, beloved by us, who died or who left us another way. Or the loss of something that once sat at the center of our identity, that had seemed essential to our core sense of self. Or the loss of our sense of safety and security. Or in a larger way these days, the loss of our ideals and our assumptions about the decency and care with which we thought most people behaved. Who among us has not been tempted to shut down in the wake of such a loss, to turn toward anger or bitterness or cynicism, perhaps even going to that deserted place for a while?

These days, it seems there are 5000 assaults on human dignity with something new and disturbing in the news every week. For some of us, that's the way it has always been. But the truth all of us eventually come to know is that there is no way to be human without having your heart broken.

A few years ago, Parker Palmer wrote a beautiful book about the habits of the heart we are called to cultivate as we live in these days so fraught with difficulty and tension. Just reading the title of the book makes me want to be a better citizen: *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. Among his many wise words and insights, he points out how everyday life is a school of the spirit that offers us chance after chance to practice dealing with a broken heart.

Every time our hearts break, Parker says, it's a teachable moment. There are at least two ways to respond. The first is to be broken apart by loss. Our hearts may explode in frustration and fury to become a thousand shards of sharp-edged shrapnel. Some people hurl these pieces like a fragment grenade toward the source of pain. When our hearts are broken this way we may try to resolve our bitterness by lashing out, inflicting the hurt we feel on others, taking some sort of grim satisfaction in the way the explosion can injure others.

Or, we withdraw, turning the hurt inward where it festers and rankles and chafes, where it keeps hurting us. The broken heart becomes a wound we carry around with us, a hole inside us that's full of fear, a secret shame, or a well of despair, or a gnawing resentment that flares up every now and then like a wild animal with a ravenous appetite.

But there is another way to experience what a broken heart might mean for us. Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart, not broken *apart*, but broken *open*, so that your heart becomes larger, so that it expands into a greater capacity to hold your own and the world's pain and joy. You take the hurt, your disappointment, your grief, your heartbreak and you allow the insight that comes in the darkness and the sorrow to soften you.

You open yourself to the possibility that God will take your broken heart and mold it into something more supple and flexible, until one day you find, perhaps much to your surprise that

your pain has been transformed into empathy, and you emerge from your grief to discover that you feel more grateful, alive, and loving, and that your ability to be understanding, and patient, and attentive to the suffering of others has grown.

After he hears about the death of John the Baptist, Jesus gets into a boat by himself to withdraw to a deserted place. When the crowd hears the news too, they follow him on foot. They pursue him. They are grieving too. They will not leave him alone. They do not want him to be alone. And when Jesus get to the shore, he sees them.

And at that moment, his broken heart opens and it unfolds in compassion for them. That's the miracle in this story. It happens in this space between the first meal and the second, in the gap between the cowardice of Herod and the courage of Jesus, in the vast difference between the cruel death-dealing imperial party Herod holds for the wealthy few and the joyful life-giving picnic Jesus hosts for all of the poor. The miracle happens in the moment when Jesus turns away from the deserted place and he opens his arms to gather us in. He invites all the people to sit down with him on the soft grass. Like the good shepherd we know in the psalms, he lies down with us in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. He restores our souls. He heals the sick and he tells them stories.

As the sun starts to fall low in the sky and dinner time approaches, the disciples grow nervous and they tell Jesus to send the crowd away. They look at the five meager loaves and the two measly fish they've got, and they say, "There's nothing here."

But Jesus, who now trusts the expansiveness of God's love and of his own heart, turns to them and says, "You need not send them away. You give them something to eat." And then he takes the bread and lifts it toward heaven. He blesses it and breaks it. He graciously extend his arms, and he gives it to them. He sets before them a table in the presence of enemies. He anoints their heads with oil and their cups overflow.

As the disciples weave in and out of the crowd, they notice how aching is met with bread, how sorrow is met with wine, and how everyone eats until they are full. They lose count of the men, the women and the children playing on the hillside, but they relax as they see that the bread is not running out. Twelve baskets fill up with leftovers. There is more than enough. They look at all the people, at all these people, and how they turn toward one another without fear, and how they have no appetite for revenge or despair. They look at that blue sky and the green grass and they hear the voice of their shepherd saying, "I am the bread of life." In his presence they taste delight and their hearts grow larger. Ours do too.

We have walked through the valley of the shadow of death. All of us have, and we will again, but we know that Jesus has walked there too, and in that there is comfort for us all. We are promised too that goodness and mercy will follow us. They will pursue us. They will bless us so that we can become a blessing for others. Our hearts will open wide with compassion and we will grow larger with love.

Our lives, like his, will become like bread for a world that is hungry. And Jesus will open his arms and gather us in. He will say dinner is ready and together we will sit down at the table of grace. Sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. Everywhere will be the feast. And together we will dwell in this house forever.