

In the early 1980s, a quick-serve Chinese restaurant opened at the Glendale Galleria mall. The owners, Andrew and Peggy Cherng, called it Panda Express. A few years later, Chef Andy Kao developed their signature dish, Orange Chicken.

Eventually, the business began to grow, and they opened their 100<sup>th</sup> restaurant in 1993 and their 1000<sup>th</sup> in 2007. Today, they have more than 2,000 restaurants in nine countries. With more than \$3 billion dollars in sales, they serve more than 90 million pounds of Orange Chicken every year. They even have fortune cookies, although one customer apparently found hers to be empty, which is rather un-fortune-ate.

Anyways, now, nearly 40 years after its founding, Panda Express continues to evolve. The restaurant recently introduced a plant-based version of its signature dish — Orange Chicken without the chicken. They call it “Beyond The Original Orange Chicken.”

Panda Express is also expanding its philanthropic work. In recent years, conversations around race have inspired the company to create the “Panda CommUnity Fund.” Since being launched in 2021, more than \$2.3 million has been contributed to organizations that support people of color and other marginalized communities. “We are a company founded by immigrants,” says Andrea Cherng, their chief branding officer. “We continue to look outward. Asking ourselves, ‘How do we best serve our people and the broader community?’”

You might say that Jesus was pondering the same kind of question when he invited his disciples to feed the immense crowd that had gathered to hear him preach and to watch him perform miracles! But before we get into the feeding story, found in today’s Gospel from Matthew, I think we should take note that Jesus had just received the tragic news that Herod has killed his cousin John the

Baptist. Needing to grieve and pray, Jesus climbs into a boat and retreats to a deserted place across the Sea of Galilee.

Sadly, his brief period of mourning is cut short when the desperately deprived people of the region follow Jesus on foot. Although he himself is suffering, Jesus isn't irritated or annoyed that his retreat has been interrupted. On the contrary, he cares deeply for these people who are in need and unable to help themselves.

Matthew tells us that Jesus has *compassion* for the people in the crowd — which means, literally, that he “suffers with” them. Jesus is moved with pity from the depth of his heart, feeling a sympathetic awareness of their distress, combined with a strong desire to provide some relief for them. Which reminds me of this past weeks' Vacation Bible School theme as we taught the kids about compassion. They learned that to have compassion means, “I see your hurt, I feel your hurt, and I help ease your hurt!”

As we continue to explore today's narrative, we observe Jesus being the Good Shepherd to the crowd as he orders them, “to sit down on the grass,” just like the Lord of Psalm 23 makes his sheep “lie down in green pastures.” Jesus has compassion for every one of his people, regardless of their background or circumstances. He is the Good Shepherd promised by the prophets, the one who teaches his people, heals their sick and injured, and provides them with food. It's almost like our story features a Jesus Express on the seashore — and the miraculous food he offers the crowd is even better than the Orange Chicken found at Panda Express.

It doesn't take much for us understand that the feeding of the 5,000 was a vital part of Christ's earthly ministry, because it is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four gospels. The feeding reminds us of God's gift of manna to the ancient Hebrews. It is also understood as a foreshadowing of the Last Supper,

especially in the blessing and breaking of the bread. The disciples only had five loaves and two fish, so Jesus introduced a new version of a signature dish right there on the seashore. He multiplied the loaves and fish, and “all ate and were filled.”

Similarly, when we receive the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in worship, we share bread just as Jesus and the people did, on that day long ago, when they gathered on the grass by the Sea of Galilee. Like the crowd who were fed spiritually and physically, we feel the compassion of Jesus in the meal we share at the altar, and we discover that our hearts are filled. You might say that Communion is the top dish served at Jesus Express. Nothing else comes close.

Earlier this week, during VBS, as we were talking about being fed by Jesus, one of the little boys at my Bible Story time pointed out that receiving Communion on Sunday mornings always filled him up! Similarly, the feeding of the 5,000 reminds us that the Lord provides. Through Christ God offers physical and spiritual nourishment for people all around the world. As it was for the crowd in the story, Jesus meets us and has compassion for us. When we feel spiritually empty, Christ breaks his bread and feeds us.

When we are worn out at the end of a long day, Jesus does not send us away to fend for ourselves. He invites us to lie down in green pastures, and he gives us what we need for life. Jesus also encourages us to extend his compassion and his nourishment to others. He wants us to continue to look outward, and to answer that question raised by Panda Express: “How do we best serve our people and the broader community?”

Notice that the disciples in this morning’s story are resistant at first. They want Jesus to send the hungry crowd away, so that they can acquire some food in neighboring villages. But Jesus says, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” The disciples are mystified by this, since they only have five

loaves and two fish, but after Jesus blesses the bread there is enough for everyone. And Jesus doesn't feed the crowd himself — he gives the loaves to the disciples, and then the disciples are the ones who feed the people.

That's the challenge of Jesus Express: To take what Jesus gives us, and then to share it with others. "*You* give them something to eat," he says, and then he gives us what we need to feed the world around us. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, about 10% of U.S. households were food insecure at some time during 2021. That means that one in 10 households across the country were forced to eat a less varied diet, participated in a federal food assistance program, or received food from a community food pantry.

Ok, so what is our take home for today? We respond to the challenge of Jesus when we *do* something to address this need. Concrete actions could include contributing to a food pantry, cooking meals for a feeding program, rescuing food that might otherwise be thrown away, or taking action in the community to eliminate a "food desert" — an area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food. Actions to fight food deserts can include creating a community garden, supporting a farmers' market, or advocating for the expansion of public transportation to areas in which there are adequate grocery stores.

"*You* give them something to eat." Such feeding and sharing can go beyond putting food in hungry stomachs. Giving can include regular tithes and offerings to the mission of the church. Giving also involves welcoming visitors to worship and sharing communion with them. Giving can even extend to creative work on issues of affordable housing and homelessness.

Remember that Jesus was famous for eating with people he did not know, and he was criticized for sitting down at tables with tax collectors and sinners. He did not consider people to be strangers when it came to sharing food and fellowship. When he reached out to the people around him, he always showed

generosity and compassion. And since Jesus has given us what we need for a good life, we can conclude that he wants us to share that goodness with others.

Ok, so does that mean that we will be depleted by our sharing? Not at all. Notice that when everyone in the crowd eats and is filled, there are 12 baskets of food left over — one for each of the 12 disciples. Sharing with others never depletes us, never hurts us, never robs us of what we need for a good life. In the wonderful abundance of God's generous gifts, there is always enough for all.

As followers of Christ, in faith we often discover that Jesus meets us in our deserted places and offers us compassion. Like a good shepherd, he gives us what we need for life — abundant food, drink and protection. And then, because he wants us to be his disciples, his servants, he asks us to feed others with the resources that he has given us. And as we do so we join Jesus in compassion and in innovation, looking outward and caring for a world in need. After all, at Jesus Express, there is always going to be enough. The Lord does, in fact, provide — for us and for the people around us. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.