

Many of you are familiar with these little bracelets that some people wear that say “WWJD”—what would Jesus do? It’s a good question, but I suspect that all too often the anticipated answer to the question sounds like tame moral advice given to people to help them fit in and be appropriate: Don’t cuss; salute the flag; don’t have naughty thoughts; help old ladies across the street; eat more Brussel sprouts and fewer brownies. Now, probably most of those are worthy of our doing, but I sense the life of Jesus and the calling of Jesus are much deeper than those tame little imperatives, much more radical. I want to start a new campaign, create a new bracelet, which is going to read: WKOPWJT: “What kind of party would Jesus throw?”

I really think it is the right and more helpful question. The Bible seems to suggest that Jesus was quite a party animal. It wasn’t that long ago that we heard from Matthew: “John came neither eating and drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon;’ the Son of Man (Jesus) came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look a glutton and a drunkard.’” The complaint against Jesus wasn’t that he was an ascetic, somebody who ate the bare minimum and didn’t drink alcohol. No, the complaint against him was that he was too much of a party animal, that he was always showing up at parties and partying with the wrong kinds of folks.

So I think the question is right: what kind of party would Jesus throw? What would his party look like? Well, we have a vision of his kind of party in Matthew’s gospel today. First, this party is huuuuge. This is no small, polite dinner party. There are 5000 people there—oh yes, 5000 *men*. The ushers who did the counting didn’t include the people who didn’t really count—women and children. So maybe there were 25,000 people there, if you think the men all had wives and they had 2.5 children each.

Jesus’ party is really big. It is not satisfied with the small notions that we have about life. It doesn’t put up with a limited guest list. You

know, you need to be a part of our club in order to eat from our table. Jesus is no first-half-of-lifer. He doesn't need to keep people out so that he knows who he is. He knows who he is. He's got a place. Keeping people out and away from the party table—that is immature religion, interested in itself, not in the life of the party. It is not the gig of Jesus.

Jesus' party is big. And it appears that it is not overly well planned. In fact, it comes as a bit of a surprise. Matthew's story tells us that Jesus is trying to get away from it all. Life has been tough. The crowds may be getting on his nerves. I suspect that he has had enough of people. But the crowds won't let him alone. Maybe they felt for him. Or maybe they have some plans. Maybe they are thinking that this is the time to develop some kind of strategy to overthrow those nasty Romans. Who knows for sure? But this we do know the party happens not because Jesus planned it, but because the crowds followed him as he was trying to get away from it all. This party happened because of what we could call "the contingencies of life." It occurred because "stuff happens."

Jesus wasn't really a party planner or didn't employ one; he responded to the needs of the moment. The disciples wanted him not to throw a party: "Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Now, it's a good question whether the people in the crowd can afford to buy food. I have a feeling many of them wouldn't have been able to. These people are likely poor, victims of money and food scarcity. Maybe the disciples don't care about that. Who knows? Maybe they simply want the folks to get back to "business as usual" or to get them out of their hair. But Jesus seems to think it's a new day. It must be a new day because he has them sitting on grass in what could have been desert-like territory. He doesn't respond to their need and the great challenge it might bring by sending them away, as the disciples wanted. Instead, he says that the party must go on. *And* they are going to be the means by which the party happens.

Did you hear Jesus? “They need not go away; **you** give them something to eat.” And did you note what happens in the story? “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.*” The disciples did the work. This is the way it is in a Jesus’ party. It is not just about the host. The host isn’t the only one who does the work. Those who follow Jesus are all involved. They are the means by which the food is shared, the drink is poured, the party happens. A Jesus party is not a SBAWIH (sit-by-and-watch-it-happen) party. Everybody has a role to play.

Now you’ll notice that initially almost everybody doesn’t *get* that. Almost everybody (call them the disciples) responds to the command to feed the crowds with a sense of lack: “We have only five loaves and two fish.” That’s how people often respond to the invitation to serve at the party. “Oh, we don’t have enough! We aren’t talented. We don’t have any skills. What could we make? We haven’t been to Meijer’s lately. People often in life start with a sense of what they don’t have. Communities do that as well. Faith communities do it. I like what my friend Ellen Cutting-Schoepf is saying in her sermon this weekend about the Matthew reading. She claims that every congregation she has been a part of often thinks on the basis of what they aren’t and what they don’t have. They say, “We’re too small, too big; [we have] too many programs or not enough. The people are too old, or too young, or not friendly enough. If only we had more people.... Or more of a certain kind of people.... Or more energy.... Or more money.... Or more people willing to help....” We start with our sense of lack.

One of the reasons I am a big fan of the downtown organization called Community enCompass is because of this organization’s commitment to ABCD, Asset-Based-Community-Development. This approach suggests when building community, when changing neighborhoods and congregations, we don’t start with a sense of lack, but with the gifts we have been given, the assets that are ours. It’s amazing how many people two little fish and five loaves of bread can

end up feeding. In Jesus' party, it isn't about what we don't have, but rather, about the gifts of God. And they are enough. In God, there is abundance. Jesus' party is about abundance. Did you note that after the crowds were fed, the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers? There's more than enough at Jesus' party.

Now I must say, though, that this more-than-enoughness doesn't mean that the party is one giant all-you-can-eat buffet. There are leftovers because there are more people yet to be included at the party. There are leftovers so folks who aren't yet at the party can have some. There are leftovers because there are poor people, hungry people, hurting people, suffering people who need an invitation to the party, who need to be included, who need the opportunity to share their gifts.

You see, this Jesus' party at its depths is about a wild welcome to all. At its depths, it is about compassion. The story of the feeding of the 5000 starts with Jesus' withdrawal from it all, but quickly we are told, "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had *compassion* for them and cured their sick." When he went ashore, Jesus was moved deeply in his guts—his liver, his bowels, his spleen, as the Greek word for compassion suggests. The party of Jesus is about gut-wrenching compassion. It's compassion that the Christian life and journey. It's what starts the party. It's what runs the party. And it is what will bring the party to a glorious conclusion.

Now before I sit down, I need to say that this isn't the only party in town. In case you didn't catch this, the story of the feeding of the 5000 takes place after another party, a party of the bigwig Herod. This was a party where only the rich and the famous were present and was an all-you-can-eat-and drink buffet. And man did they drink. They got sloshed. And all kinds of wild things happened, things in a PG-13 church I probably shouldn't mention. And the party ended as this kind of party often does—with violence. One of the power mongers wanted John the Baptist's head on a platter, and she got it.

You've got to get this. There is an alternative to the Jesus' party. And it is not a party of compassion. It's a party of power, control, unrestrained wealth, gluttony at the expense of others, and violence. I suppose you could go to that party if you would like. Many people do. Initially, it seems like a fun party. I mean, it can be enlivening to hang out with the movers and shakers. It can make you feel important. And getting to eat and drink whatever you want, wow, that sounds right up my alley. But this isn't a party that leads to life. It leads to death. It's a party that destroyed John the Baptist and might cost you your soul.

Hey, listen up! All you who thirst, come to the Jesus' party. Come to the waters. You don't have to have money. You don't have to be important. Come to the party of compassion, grace, and love. Trust me. There's no better party. This is the party not of death, but of life! Come! It's going to be a blast!