

PRISON MINISTRY AWARENESS SUNDAY

Sample Homily

July 30, 2023

*Written by Toby John, MDiv, MSW
OCPM Prison Relationship Manager*



Orthodox Christian
PRISON MINISTRY

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory Forever!

Today on Prison Ministry Awareness Sunday, we are called to reflect upon the Gospel of Matthew 14:14-22. Today we see a miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. This miracle is something that we may have been hearing since we were children, and we tend to skip over it since we know the jist of it. But if we look closely at the details, we see a deep connection between the feeding of the five thousand and ministering to those in prison.

In the narrative written by the Evangelist John we see Christ satisfying the needs of the multitude. The next day the multitude who saw Christ was expecting something miraculous again but He tells them “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life...I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” This miracle not only shows Christ’s divine power to satisfy physical hunger but also conveys a deeper message to our calling to serve those in prison.

Oftentimes our attitude is similar to the disciples’ at the beginning of this narrative. We see that there may be someone in need, maybe an elderly, sick, or homeless person, or in today’s case, a prisoner, and we say to them, “I don’t have the time or money to help this individual out. Let them figure it out themselves.” Or specifically, “This prisoner committed the crime and so let them do the time. Let them get themselves out of this situation that they created.” Christ could have allowed these people to leave. He could have allowed the multitude to go back and get food on their own, but He didn’t because He was moved with compassion for them. This multitude sought after Christ to listen intently to His teachings and to be touched with His healing hand. It was for this reason our Lord commanded His disciples, *“They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”*

Christ was fully aware that this multitude did not have any food, but rather than just feeding them immediately, He waited for His disciples to take initiative. We see very clearly that *Christ wanted His disciples to imitate His compassion*, and it is for that reason He waited for them. Christ will perform the miracle and feed this multitude, but He uses the disciples to carry out His will. Christ's will is carried out through the actions of others.

Just like the disciples, we are called to be the ministers of God's design. We are called to be the hands and feet of our Lord, carrying out His will. Christ didn't ask the disciples to turn the five loaves and two fish into enough food, but rather He simply says, "Bring them here to Me." *The disciples brought more than just the five loaves and two fish, they brought the multitude to Christ.*

Today, Christ gives us the same command, "Bring them here to Me." We are called to embody the same compassion that Christ had on the multitude to those in prison. Like the disciples, our responsibility is to bring those in prison to Christ. We are called to be vessels of His love, His mercy, and His saving grace. Our role is not to replace Christ, but to act as His instruments, proclaiming His Gospel and inviting others into His healing presence.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Blessed Theophylact states, "Jesus withdrew to a desert place, to the nations who were desolate without God, and He healed the sick in soul. Then He fed them..." When we encounter individuals in prison, they may carry burdens of guilt, shame, and despair. They often feel disconnected from society, abandoned and forgotten. Having witnessed and experienced the miracles of Christ, it is now our responsibility to bring to Christ those who have not yet found Him. Similar to the disciples who gathered the loaves and fish, we are called to gather those in prison, assuring them that they are not alone in their struggles. Our role is to provide support, encouragement, and compassionate understanding. However, we must always remember that we are mere instruments, and it is Christ alone who can truly nourish their souls. As the body of Christ, we recognize that He is the living Bread of Life. *Our purpose is to guide those imprisoned towards this eternal sustenance, reminding them that they are not forgotten, that their worth is not defined by their mistakes, and that the love and forgiveness of Christ knows no boundaries.*

Beloved in the Lord, we are presented with the opportunity to become vessels of God's healing, His hands and feet to those who are incarcerated. It only requires a compassionate heart, as our Lord exemplified today when He healed and fed the multitude. On this Prison Ministry Awareness Sunday, let us recognize that, like the disciples, our role is to bring those in prison to Christ. Together, let us be bearers of hope, instruments of healing, and vessels of God's healing grace. Amen.