

“Soul Food”

“Holler, holler, holler, till my throat get sore.  
If it wasn't for the pretty girls, I wouldn't have to holler no more.  
I say, Watermelon! Watermelon!  
Got 'em red to the rind, lady.”<sup>1</sup>

That is one of the shouts of an Arabber (pronounced (long a) – rabber) as he walks his colorful horse-drawn cart through the streets of Baltimore selling fresh vegetables and fruit. Arabbers started plying their trade in East Coast cities in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The trade has died out in every city but Baltimore. Arabbers provide convenient access to produce for people who do not want to go to the grocery store, or who live in food deserts (areas without stores), are homebound, or people just driving by. Here are a few photos of Arabbers, their carts, and horses.

While the Arabbers sell their produce, the Lord in the passage from Isaiah has a different plan. The Lord begins his shout with “Ho” like an Arabber might, but then things change. The Lord says, “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” The Lord is promising something new. It is the Kingdom of God where we who are thirsty can drink water aplenty. It is also where, for the hungry, there is food to buy even if we have no money. The Lord goes on to affirm that we can “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” This is an invitation to a remarkable heavenly feast. But it is also a challenge.

In the next line, the Lord asks, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” I get the feeling that God has moved on from the specifics of food into an analogy. The next line clarifies it. “Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” God is not providing nutrition information. There is something more important that the Lord is imploring us to attend to. That is affirmed in the next line when God entreats us, “Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” God is telling us, as Jesus will later say, that “Man does not live by bread alone, but by the word of God.”

Jesus calls people to follow him when he tells John's disciples, “Come and see.” And when he tells us, “Come to me all that are weary and heavy laden, and I will refresh you.” Jesus beckons us to him as the Lord does, using the same words.

These lines from Isaiah resonate throughout the Bible. We hear them echo in today's Psalm. The psalmist praises God, saying, “You open wide your hand/and satisfy the needs of every living creature.” The needs of the people were satisfied without price, and the psalmist recognizes all living things are included.

“The LORD is gracious and full of compassion,” and so is Jesus. Even when he is seeking solitude and respite, the crowds follow him, and he has compassion for them. Although he would like to be alone, he does not send the people away as the disciples suggest. He keeps them together as a new community drawn to him and his teaching.

The disciples are worried and frightened that the little food they have is not enough to feed the masses (I wonder if they were also worried that they did not have enough to feed themselves). Did Jesus multiply the loaves and fishes to be enough for

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabber> accessed August 1, 2026.

the crowd? Miracles happen. But for those who do not believe in miracles, perhaps there is another explanation. What if the generosity and trust in abundance shown by Jesus in his sharing of their meager food set an example for the crowds to do likewise? What if the generosity that the Lord demonstrates in Isaiah and in the Psalms inspires the people to share among themselves? If you cannot believe in miracles, perhaps that is a plausible explanation.

No matter how you view the feeding of the five thousand men as well as women and children. (I wonder why the writer didn't count the women and children. That number would have made it an even more impressive feat.) We are met with an example of compassion, kindness, and generosity that foretells the Kingdom of Heaven.

There are those today and throughout history who have said that compassion is weakness. They have said that caring for the poor, sick, frail, and marginalized is foolish. They say those people have made their bed; let them lie in it. They are not our problem, although they get in our way. But who likes a bully? Who wants to be hurtful and hateful? Who wants to be viewed as a taker and a persecutor? I don't. I hope you don't either.

Jesus, time and again, admonishes us to show compassion. He heals the sick, feeds the hungry, preaches Good News to the poor and imprisoned. Jesus' teaching is one of life-giving compassion. He never ever emboldens taking. Read his parables. Take note of who he confronts. It is not the poor but the rich, powerful, and religious elites.

God and Jesus call us to lives of compassion and mercy. Despite the many books of the Bible and the many stories that we read, Jesus says there are only two commandments that we are to follow—love God and love your neighbor. And if you have any confusion about who your neighbor is, revisit the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Even the best of us seems to have difficulty following those two commandments, whether it is in our giving of money or time, our voting, our care for others, our care for the natural world, or our seeking peace for all. The world and our egos make it hard. Do as God said in Deuteronomy, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." We are a forgetful lot, and Lord knows that we need a bit of reminding.

When you hear the shout of the Lord like the Arabber selling produce, know that he is calling us to remind us of what Jesus called the greatest two commandments, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."<sup>2</sup> That's right, everything in God's teaching hangs on these two commandments.

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:37-40

**Photos of Baltimore Arabbers.**



More photos at  
<https://www.workingimagephotography.com/blog/2018/3/26/baltimores-arabbers-and-an-invitation>