

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: August 6, 2023, Year A, 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 14:13-21

Title: When we are empty. . .

Focus: Following the death of Lazarus, Jesus withdrew to be by himself. Upon his return, how was he able to respond to the crowd that had followed him? How were he and the disciples able to feed the crowd? This is a story of hope that reminds us of the grace and provision of God.

### **Gospel Reading: Matthew 14:13-21**

<sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. <sup>15</sup>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." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." <sup>17</sup>They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." <sup>18</sup>And he said, "Bring them here to me." <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. <sup>21</sup>And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

### **The Weight of Grief**

A church member and I were talking the week before last about grief and loss and difficult health circumstances. I identified with her situation and recognized how important it is to have supportive friends as I said, "There have been times when I have experienced grief so heavy that my goal was to make it through the next hour or to dinner time."

I don't mean that I was so distraught that my own well-being was at immediate dire risk, it's just that the weight of grief was so heavy that looking at a block of time of an hour out or to dinnertime was what seemed like a reasonable goal for carrying this weight.

**Grief is heavy.** Sometimes it is so heavy and so persistent that you can't think of a year down the road or a month down the road or even next week. That might be too overwhelming to look that far down the road.

One of the helpful slogans from AA and other 12 Step Recovery Programs is "One Day at a Time." It is wisdom that encourages those in the program to similarly think about staying sober for the next 24 hours. That's the chunk of time to look at or

that's the goal. If they do that one day and every day, then it will get easier as they go along. Sobriety may be different from grief, though both are forms of life-changing trauma, so I think there is enough overlap to recognize the burden or weight or heaviness of those circumstances.

### **Excerpt from a person in 12 step recovery talking about "One Day at a Time."<sup>1</sup>**

Here's how one person in recovery similarly described the how she sets out a period of time as a goal to manage her anxiety:

In the early days, weeks, months of my recovery, the slogan "One Day at a Time" helped get me through some of those almost-impossible days when trauma was eating me alive. I had no idea what was going to happen in my life. Trying to exist, fold laundry, parent my children, without a constant reel of [anxious] movies in my mind seemed like an impossible task. I started with setting 20-minute timers. No imagining scenes for 20 minutes. I could do that. I could handle that. And if I couldn't, that was okay. I would just re-set the timer. I could make it for just One More Day. I could make it for 20 minutes.

- **Grief is heavy and persistent and maybe you have experienced that kind of heaviness.**

### **What's a Miracle in this Story?**

I suppose that people would call this story in chapter 14 of Matthew (A version of it is in all four gospels, by the way) a miracle story. They would likely call it that because Jesus fed 5000 men, plus women and children with 5 loaves and 2 fish--that's a miracle!

I wouldn't dispute that bold print heading to name that story, but there's more than that going on or more remarkable things happening.

### **Jesus Bears the Weight of Grief**

Those who designated the Lectionary text begin the reading in verse 13 and so we miss what has just happened in the scene immediately preceding this one. We get just a hint of it in the opening verse.

- <sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus heard this. . ." (v. 14).  
"Heard what?" you would of course ask.

And so, you'd back up to find out: Herod Antipas, the ruler of the region put in position by Ceasar Augustus, was throwing himself a birthday party. When his stepdaughter danced before the company at the party, this so pleased Herod that in front of the whole crowd, he made a pledge to give her whatever she asked.

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous. "What does One Day at a Time Mean?" at S.A. Lifeline Foundation.  
<https://salifeline.org/2017/03/01/what-does-one-day-at-a-time-mean/>

Prompted by her mother, she asked for the death of John the Baptist (His head on a platter, Mt. 14:8). Though Herod was troubled by this request, he had made this public oath and felt he must keep it and so he ordered the death of John the Baptist.

So as the designated Lectionary passage begins, Jesus is bearing the weight of this heavy loss. We sometimes describe John and Jesus as cousins. Their respective mothers, Elizabeth for John and Mary for Jesus, were “relatives” (Luke 1:36). When the angel Gabriel came to tell Mary that she would have a son, he reassured her that “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37) and told her that Elizabeth, who was of old age and had not yet had a child, was 6 months pregnant. So, John and Jesus were linked from before birth. And John, of course, introduced people to Jesus as Messiah, the one for whom they were waiting.

John’s death at Herod’s command is not only devastating for Jesus as its own sudden loss, but also a signal that Jesus, too, would be threatened.

That’s the context as we begin this designated passage, which then tells us that Jesus withdrew in a boat to be by himself (v. 13). The text doesn’t say what he did. It doesn’t say how long he was there. What do you imagine?

I imagine he was bearing the heavy weight of grief and was praying in deep anguish. There’s a passage in Romans which describes the Spirit crying out for us with sighs too deep for words.

- <sup>26</sup>Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26-27).

Whether Jesus found was able to express himself in words or rely on the Spirit’s intervention, I imagine he was connecting with God in prayer. He intentionally went away/withdrew to a deserted place to be by himself. He was bearing the heavy weight of grief.

As narrator, Matthew is sparse with detail here in what happens next; the action moves quickly without additional description, attribution, or motivation, but moves on to the next action.

- Jesus withdrew in a boat.
- The crowds heard and followed him on foot from the towns.
- When Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd.

And that’s when there’s a bit more description and an insight into Jesus’ motivation.

- <sup>14</sup>When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.
  - And so, he healed their sick, tended their needs, and was present with them, even following his own loss and grief.

I don't know how to quantify the power and resiliency of Jesus—which really is just the point of this story—how can you place limits on Jesus whom Matthew has told us in the first chapter is Emmanuel, “God with us,” (Matthew 1:23), but that Jesus was able to respond with compassion is remarkable given the nearness and the weight of his loss—with the death of John the Baptist. Jesus reveals the character of the God, which is represented here by the word “compassion.”

## Jesus once again identifies with the downtrodden

Four weeks ago, when we celebrated “Christmas in July,” the focus in the sermon from the passage from Luke 2 was the angel Gabriel saying to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, that **“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord”** (Luke 2:11).

The point I emphasized was that the Angel Gabriel proclaimed that this is “good news of great joy for all the people.” It's for *all people*, and it's for the people who most need to hear it—the ones who most often hear and receive *bad* news or who are outsiders. I described how Gabriel delivered that message not to Ceasar Augustus, whose power was evident at the beginning of the passage as he made the decree that all the world should be counted (or registered), but that this message was delivered to the lowly shepherds.

That same contrast between those who were acknowledged to be powerful in that time and culture and the lowly as represented by the shepherds is evident in this passage as well. Herod Antipas is throwing himself a birthday party in the passage at the beginning of the chapter. He is so swept up by the guests and the atmosphere that he pledges to give to Salome whatever she asks.

The very next scene is a very different kind of gathering. Not a fancy party for the rich and powerful, but people struggling with the challenges of daily living. With whom does Jesus identify? He has compassion for the crowd of poor, sick, and needy people. Matthew is indicating by these contrasting scenes just what kind of God Jesus represents.<sup>2</sup>

## What's the Surprise or the Miracle?

In a story we call a miracle story because Jesus fed 5000 men and more women and children, **the first surprising (and maybe miraculous) thing** that happens in the story before we get to the food is that the grief-weary Jesus, who has a crowd following him loaded down by their own desperate need, has compassion on them..

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<sup>2</sup> Insight from David Lose. Posted July 28, 2014 at *In the Meantime*.  
<https://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-8a-the-real-miracles/>

The **second surprising thing** is how he invites the disciples into the story.

- They're ready to call it a day and send the crowd away. They suggest to Jesus that he send them away (v. 15).
- He responds, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."
  - **You** give them something to eat.
- They are most aware of limitations or what they don't have:
  - "We have nothing here. . . but 5 loaves and 2 fishes" (v. 17).
- "Bring them here to me" says Jesus, who will bless and multiply what they have to offer until "all were filled" and there were 12 baskets of left-over broken pieces (v. 20).

The second surprising thing is the contrast or tension between the scarcity orientation of the disciples "We have nothing" and the abundance orientation of Jesus: "bring them here."

And Jesus uses and blesses the involvement of the disciples to bring about what has likely struck us from the first reading of the story—that "all ate and were filled" (v. 20).

Matthew depicts what happens when you move from a worldview of scarcity – "we have nothing here but five loaves and fishes" – to one of abundance – "thank you, God, for these five loaves and fishes." God used even these reluctant disciples, that is, to care for the poor and hungry that God loves so much (David Lose).

**Listen carefully to the language and manner in which Jesus blesses what they have offered:**

- **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 text here mirrors how Matthew describes Jesus serving the disciples at the Last Supper:

<sup>26</sup>While they were eating, Jesus **took** a loaf of bread, and after **blessing** it he **broke** it, **gave it to the disciples**, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body" (Matthew 26:26).

This meal is a reminder of the presence and power of Jesus. Those of us who have been fed at this table are invited to go and do as Jesus did in this story, which is to be a sign of God's love to all whom we meet and especially those in deepest need.

## Lutheran Affirmations about the Lord's Supper

Here is a way we hear that affirmation about the Lord's Supper expressed: During the "Affirmation of Baptism," a liturgy in the church in which we hear when we affirm and reaffirm our faith upon becoming formal church members:

### ELCA Affirmation of Baptism:

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

**live** among God's faithful people;

**hear** the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper;

**proclaim** the good news of God in Christ through word and deed;

**serve** all people following the example of Jesus; and

**strive** for justice and peace in all the earth?"

**Response:** We do, and ask God to help and guide us.

*(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, pg. 236)*

We recognize in this pledge that we are strengthened through hearing God's word in Scripture and sharing in the Lord's Supper. As reflected in today's passage, that renewal or strengthening is what enables us to **proclaim** the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; to **serve** all people, following the example of Jesus, and to **strive** for justice and peace.

## Another affirmation of the place of the Lord's Supper for Lutherans

"The Lord's Supper stands at the center of our lives as Christians. In that meal, we received Jesus' presence into our very bodies. We receive God's gifts of forgiveness of sin, new life and salvation. At the same time, as a community God makes us into the body of Christ, one with all in every time and place who share this holy meal. We become the body of Christ for the sake of the world. That is, we participate in God's mission. Having been showered with God's gifts, God sends us forth to take that love and compassion out into the world to the lonely, the oppressed, the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, the angry, and those suffering in mind, body and spirit."

--From the focus on *HEAR the Word of God* at the ELCA.org worship page on "Living our Baptismal Covenant."<sup>3</sup>

When we are empty, we are invited to the table to experience the presence of God as Jesus is the host.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Faith-Practices/Living-Our-Baptismal-Covenant/Hear>