

Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21
Matthew 14:13-21

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Communion
Midway Presbyterian Church
August 6, 2023

Loaves and Fishes

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today is the only one in the whole Book of Psalms that bears the title, “Praise.” As in our gospel lesson this morning we hear of the Lord’s compassion. Listen to these words from Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21 . . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

There are relatively few stories that are recorded in all four gospels. The story of Jesus feeding the five thousand is one of them. And it is the only miracle story recorded in all four. Jesus has just received news of the death of John the Baptist, so we assume that it is for that reason that he withdraws to a lonely place. Nonetheless, the crowds find him. Listen to these words from Matthew 14:13-21 . . .

Sermon

It must have been difficult to find a place to be alone in Galilee, to get any distance away from the crowds; for Galilee was a small country, only 50 miles from north to south and 25 miles from east to west. According to the historian Josephus, in the time of Jesus there were 204 towns and villages in Galilee, each with a population of at least 15,000 people. In such a thickly populated area it was not easy to get away and be by yourself.

But it was quiet on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and at its widest the sea was only eight miles across. Some of Jesus’ friends were fishermen and it was not difficult to embark on one of their boats and seek solitude on the east side of the lake. And that is what Jesus does when he hears of the death of John the Baptist.

We have the account of John's death in the twelve verses just preceding our Gospel lesson from Matthew—of John being in prison because of speaking the truth to Herod about his taking his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, and the gruesome account of Herodias' scheming at Herod's birthday party when the daughter of Herodias danced pleasingly before the company and Herod. Of John's head being brought in on a platter. Here in Matthew 14 we see the striking contrast of the meal at Herod's party, with the meal that Jesus will host for the gathered crowd. One with vindictiveness; the other with compassion.

The Evangelist Matthew doesn't tell us precisely why Jesus, having learned of John's death withdrew to a secluded place. Was it to grieve? Was it to escape the immediate threat of a similar fate? Was it to reflect on what John's death meant for Jesus' future? Possibly it was a combination of all of these.

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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. (Matthew 14:13-14)

These people were ravaged by false religious leaders and by Roman might. But here in this 14th chapter, it is the sickness of the people that wrung the heart of our Lord. He has withdrawn to a lonely place; but when met by a large crowd of people, Jesus had compassion and cured the sick. As noted in the introduction, our Psalm reading today reflects God's loving care for people:

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made. (145:8-9)

The story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand recalls many times in the past when God provided food for his people. Like in Exodus in the wilderness with manna and quail. Or when God miraculously fed Elisha when he had fled from the wrath of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. (1 Kings 19:1-10)

And so the church of Jesus Christ has accepted this compassion as part of its life and mission. We can be proud that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has compassion for those harassed and helpless, for the sick and hungry. We have long-range programs, as well as emergency relief efforts. We can be proud that Midway Presbyterian Church supports a number of ministries to people in need, like Thornwell Home for Children, Family Promise, and the Salvation Army. With our \$.02 A Meal Offerings, based on the biblical principle of the widow's mite, people are asked to set aside \$.02 per meal. And the offering is received at our Second Sunday Dinners. Each quarter this year the proceeds rotate between Good Neighbor Cupboard, Meals on Wheels, the Emergency Soup Kitchen, and Presbytery Cents Ability.

Jesus had compassion on the crowds, and healed their sick. And the compassion of Jesus rubbed off on the disciples. Some miracles Jesus performed as a sign of his identity. Others to teach important truths. But here the miracle happens because of his compassion for the people. When we are sick, suffering or carrying heavy burdens, we can be assured that Jesus has compassion on us.

As evening approached, the disciples recognized that the people would be getting hungry. This was a remote place; so they would need to go into the villages and buy some food. But Jesus has another idea. He said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." However, the disciples protest, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

Five loaves and two fish betoken our human helplessness. Our little. If there had been just six or seven people when it came time to eat, then a disciple might have thought there was something he could do, but a crowd of thousands of hungry people? The disciples despair over the little they have to offer to the seemingly impossible task. Just five loaves and two fish. To which Jesus replies, "Bring them here to me." (v. 18)

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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. (vv. 19-20)

Therefore, let us not despair of what we *cannot* do or *cannot* give. Let us bring ourselves and our talents, our time and our money to Jesus, and he will bless them. There may be ample resources to feed the hungry. There may be ample spiritual resources to quench people's thirst. But our physical bounty will not be distributed aright, nor our spiritual bounty properly invested, unless they are brought to Christ. Apart from him, our labors will not bear fruit.

A wise minister once said to his congregation:

I couldn't make it through school on my own. There were always subjects I struggled with and projects I needed help with. In fact, there is very little of life I could do on my own. How is it that I have something of value to say every Sunday to you? The truth is I don't on my own. I just have to trust that if I bring what I have to Jesus, he will make it enough.

The seemingly little we can do, even though it be but a word of cheer, a prayer, a phone call, a hand on the shoulder, a note, a meal provided, even though it may seem useless against the vast need, becomes by Christ's blessing of great value. When we bring what we have to Jesus, the seemingly impossible becomes possible. The Bible is not a manual for self-help. It's a proclamation of, "Bring what you have to me. Bring your gifts, bring your hopes, bring your burdens. Bring them here to me. Bring me your loaves and fishes." "What is impossible with man is possible with God." (Lk. 18:27)

You may have heard of the Loaves and Fishes ministry. This organization serves the Greenville-Anderson-Mauldin Metropolitan area. It collects local, edible, but surplus or unsold food that would otherwise go to waste, and instead re-distributes it to local emergency food programs. It's a ministry that could be considered by our Community Life and Mission Committee as an option for a Jar Offering or a 2-Cents-a-Meal offering.

Compassion. Miraculous abundance from little gifts. And finally, the sacramental element is a major feature of this story. Eucharistic language (that is, language of The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper) is used:

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. (vv. 19-20)

He blessed; he broke; he gave. The disciples acted as the Elders in the early church in distributing the bread to the company assembled. The usual prayer at the beginning of a Jewish meal is: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast brought forth bread from the earth." Remembering, we can give thanks not only for our daily bread, but also for Christ, the Bread of Life. And we pray for the hungry, in body and in spirit. Maintaining that vital connection of branches to the vine, of ourselves, to Christ, will assure fruitful labor.

The story of the feeding of multitude here in Matthew is a familiar one, but its message is always fresh:

--That God loves and cares for people.

--That as disciple of Christ we are called to be his hands and his feet, the means through which he normally does his work in the world.

--And finally that God will take what seems so little to us, and transform it into a real blessing.

The events that took place on that hillside in Galilee 2000 years ago were a miracle to the thousands assembled that day. Similar miracles happen today when we, inspired by Christ's example, join hearts and hands and answer his call to ministries of grace and compassion.

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