

9th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.2.20

Matthew 14:13-21

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

A number of years ago I was to go away on vacation. It would have me missing a Sunday leading worship, so I lined up a substitute preacher, someone trusted and true. She would do a fine job.

When I got back and asked how things went, people said everything was good. But, in the future, people would prefer not to have her back. Not a congregation of complainers, they were gentle but, with some further questions, clear about this.

"What went wrong?" I asked.

"She said we were dying," people told me. In an off-hand reference to "churches like these," she lumped this little congregation in with "churches that are dying."

"We're not dying," one life-long member told me. "We're just small. There's a difference."

She was right. There *is* a difference. You can *feel* it if you pay attention.

But small congregations spur their own set of questions as to whether to keep on keeping on. How do you justify all the expense for just this little group of people to be nurtured in the faith? How could it be thought right and good that these congregations of twenty or so people are worth the cost of the building and its upkeep, the specialized training that goes into a professional clergy-person and a professional musician, the fuss of preparing for worship and gathering for Bible study or Godly Play? The two congregations I serve both have endowments that organizations in service of far more than twenty people would leap to have, could moreover make good use of.

So how can we rest easy on these? How can we move slowly into the future, spending it down, spending it down, all the while people go hungry and the creation groans on?

To be honest, I sense these questions behind a lot of the talk that goes on at the conference and denominational level, and behind the notion of the legacy church. The legacy church: congregations that make the hard decision to close down as a worshipping community, to decommission and even sell their meetinghouses, and to bequeath their endowments to other organizations in line with their mission—another congregation or the denomination or a service organization. These are called legacy congregations. And I don't doubt that these come to this painful decision well, honestly and faithfully. But there's a creep to it. That one painful decision becomes a more ambient question, and it hovers over all these tiny congregations: how do you justify yourselves?

Especially given the imperatives of the gospel. “*You* give them something to eat.”

That's Jesus, of course, speaking to the disciples who'd come to him.

They'd come to him because he'd gone away, had gone away because of having “heard this.”

This is what he heard: that John had been killed, that Herod had killed him, that Herod had him killed because Salome, his stepdaughter, had asked him to have John killed, beheaded and his head then served to her on a platter.

This, she did because she had danced at a dinner party for her stepfather Herod and his friends, and had been so pleasing amidst this likely lurid scene that Herod wanted to reward her with anything she asked. She had no particular need for John's head on platter, but her mother Herodias did, she who hated John because he kept saying that her marriage to Herod was unlawful (which it was) and because (I imagine) she hated her husband for taking her into this unlawful, though quite luxurious, marriage, and because she knew Herod liked John, though he'd had him imprisoned for his saying that his marriage to Herodias was unlawful (which it was), so, as she watched her daughter dance pleasingly amidst this lurid scene for a leering, lascivious group, and then as she heard Herod say he would give anything to this girl that she asked, Herodias hatched a plan: “Ask for John's head on a platter.”

Once done, John's disciples came to get their teacher's mutilated body, to prepare it for burial, and then to bury it.

Then they went to Jesus and told him what had happened.

Then he withdrew to a deserted place by himself.

John and Jesus were cousins, were likely quite close. Six months older than Jesus, John was the so-called herald of the Messiah, the one who went before him in life, the one who understood himself to be the one foretold as preparing a way for the coming of the Lord, the one who would make his paths straight. John would baptize Jesus. John would recognize Jesus as the Lamb whom God offered to the world, a turning upside down of the whole notion of sacrifice. John would now have been killed by capricious, corrupt, ridiculous powers and principalities, and this would strongly suggest something of how Jesus would also go.

Now, Jesus really was alone in the world.

Always singular, now he was deeply alone

The story is pretty insistent on this point. That he withdrew, to a deserted place, by himself. An editor would say, "This is redundancy." The writer would answer, "That's very much the point."

So, I wonder, was the coming of the crowds a welcome thing to him, or not?

The people of the crowd were also affected by the news of the John's cruel death—watchful of Jesus' pained reaction, worried for his wellbeing, worried for their own wellbeing (for what might it mean that the king of their realm was in a murderous mood?), heartsick themselves for John's death.

I wonder, was Jesus put out by their reactions, put upon by their following him into the deserted place where he meant to go by himself?

If so, how quickly was it before the compassion that moved him came to move him?

Though it might have come as a relief to him; *they* might have come as a relief to him. Compassion is literally suffering with, *passio* meaning suffering and *com-* meaning with. Sometimes it helps to suffer with someone who's also suffering. A burden shared is a burden halved, right? Isn't that what they say? Sometimes it helps to have something to do when you're sad or afraid or a combination of the two.

There must have been a lot to do—a lot of healing, a lot of the work of compassion.

It took most of the day.

Darkness began to fall.

When the disciples decided that it'd be best if the crowds were to go into the villages to buy each for themselves some food, they were being prudent, these disciples. They were being wise. An emotional crowd of about 10,000 adults is a volatile thing to begin with, and that's not even imagining the countless children there in their care. Especially when there's no common point of focus, an emotional crowd of *hungry* people is even more volatile, worried adults, crying children. Add darkness to that, and you've a dangerous situation. It's not for nothing that what makes the difference between peaceful protests and something more dangerous is daylight turned to darkness. That was my experience earlier this summer in Boston. Night fell and things got scary, an uplifting afternoon turned to a fraught, conflicted night. So, it was prudence that had the disciples advising thus: "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."

Jesus had other possibilities in mind.

A lot of commentary on this passage will go light on the miraculous aspect of this story and will go heavy with the imperative of this: "*You* give them something to eat." A lot of preaching on this, especially among the more "liberal" churches, what with our low Christology and our high anthropology, will emphasize the fact that the disciples were in fact able to give them something to eat.

But, if you ask me, we tend to think less of Christ than we should and more of humanity than we should. You'll hear this in the preached suspicion that Jesus must have inspired generosity with his imploring them, "*You* give them something eat." You'll hear this low Christology and high anthropology in the preached suggestion that this command of Jesus must have cajoled out of the disciples more than just the five loaves of bread and two fish that they at first claimed was all they had. His command to them must have had them search themselves and search those in the crowd, whereupon they came up with enough for all to be full and for there to be leftovers.

The miracle wasn't a supernatural abounding of meager provisions, in other words. The miracle was that anxious people pushed themselves past their anxiety into a place of generosity.

The story, though, doesn't easily allow for such an anthropological reading—for, in order for a crowd this size to be made full while leaving leftovers, there must have been *a lot* of food stashed away in people's sacks.

No, the story insists there was a miracle here that happened, and it wasn't the "miracle" of a changed mood but the miracle of changed substance.

Which, why should we demand it be otherwise? Yes, we're smart. Yes, we're reasonable. Yes, we're educated. But Jesus was someone of whom the claims, and more over the proclamations, have always been out of this world. So why stop now?

Jesus was God manifest.

Jesus was the real and full presence of God.

Jesus was the Lord of all creation manifest amidst the creation as one created.

Jesus was Being Itself come as *a* being—and the effect of such a one as this is utter fulfillment of the Lord's abundance, utter realization of God's limitlessness. Why disallow such a thing? Just because *we* can't do it, just because we've never seen it done, doesn't mean Jesus couldn't do it, didn't do it.

It was in the blessing.

Something happened in the blessing.

Godly Play has us wonder where we are in the story, or what part of the story is about us. When we hear a story in the Godly Play fashion, one of the wondering questions that follows the telling is this: "I wonder where you are in the story, or what part of the story is about you."

Preaching often comes of this same question.

When preaching on this story of the five loaves of bread and two fish and hungry crowd now fed to fullness with leftovers besides, it's most often supposed that where the hearer is in the story, or what part of the story is about the congregation, is in the disciples. The disciples are us. We are the disciples. We are the ones to whom Jesus as ever said, "*You* give them something to eat."

Thus, we are active. Thus, we are powerful. Thus, we are charitable. Thus, we are good. Sure, we might be condemned for not always being so effective. Yes, with this reading we risk being judged as failures for there yet being hungry people in our midst, for there yet being desperate need in this world where we've been commissioned to serve for the sake of the gospel. But at least we're powerful, and often charitable, and sometimes good.

But what if we're not the disciples? What if we're the bread? Not powerful, not charitable, not really that good, mere substance awaiting transformation, mere potential awaiting the blessing of activation, would this be enough for you?

The mainline church is used to being something more dignified than that. We're used to being the dolers out of charity, the wielders of a though quiet, genteel sort of power.

I remember singing a hymn a number of years ago in Monterey. It was from the *Pilgrim Hymnal*, that venerable book of stout, reliable hymns. One line from one verse called forth this dynamic, missional as regards the rest of the world. I don't remember the hymn, and can't manage to find that line, a needle in a haystack, a turn of phrase in book full of turns of phrase. I only remember the experience of singing it, the textual suggestion that what we have here, among this people of the mainline Protestant faith, on these shores of American freedom and abundance, is what the world wants and needs, and what it is our bound and duty to offer unto them. I'd never noticed that line, or perhaps never sung that hymn, though the *Pilgrim Hymnal* is the one I grew up with. I was embarrassed, not quite horrified, and I looked up from my book to see a long-time member of the church singing from the back pew, looking up now with the same reaction. Our eyes met, we both blushed, and together we tacitly decided, "We're never singing *this* hymn again."

You, you of these tiny congregations: I wonder if you're not the disciples meant to feed the hungry crowd. I wonder if we're not those empowered disciples, doling out what's needed. I wonder if instead you are the bread awaiting enaction, if *we* are the bread awaiting blessing to abound.

Taken, blessed, broken, and distributed: we're not much. But God isn't finished with us. Not yet.

There are so many places where you could do the work of the gospel. There are so many organizations that have taken a page from the mainline playbook, and that embark on good work, and good works, with an almost missionary zeal. We can, and indeed should, join up with any of these, as many of these as we each or all can.

The church, though, is something other than any of these. Though the good works are ones of which we might all eagerly endorse the doing, we are also a place of conscious and called-for God-given blessing. We are a people of blessing, a body gathered in witness to God as real and abiding and active in the world. We are a chorus of voices proclaiming the truth: that love is the

most powerful thing there is; that the powers and principalities come to nothing before God; that, though time will bear all things away, what always and ever after stands is God in all fullness and God's created works all fulfilled of their original purpose, now risen and redeemed and rejoicing because all reason to rejoice has come to full being and all cause of weeping has been transformed by God's amazing grace, "Alleluia! Alleluia!"

This is our task, from which all others flow. This is our work, the work of the people of God, the liturgy by which blessing pours forth unto a world that groans in need of blessing—liturgy meaning the work of the people. And this is our justification. This is why we need not suspect that some other group could do better with what assets have been entrusted to us. This is why we can stand convicted and rest assured that no one would be more faithful than we will have been in the investing of what gifts we've been given in God's name.

These, our buildings, stand for God's beauty and grace. They stand for our witness and faithfulness. Thus, insofar as they are open to all who'd seek God's face or seek out living community, they are worthy recipients of our stewardship and care.

These, our endowments, are a sign of the trust vested in us to continue with our proclamation that God is with us and amidst all the creation.

These, are well-resourced clergy and deacons and laity and musicians, aren't a decadent use of time and treasure for some mere performance, some silly pretense or act of pretending, but are a steadfast sign, nearly sacramental, of a truth that will stand past whatever measure of time we deem significant—past this season or this year, past the next election and whatever administration comes after that, past the playing out of this terrible pandemic, through even our woeful response to it, past the rising of the next generation, past the eclipse of once-mighty nations and empires.

Truly, it is by the fact that we are gathered for blessing like mere and meager lumps of bread that we are then empowered to be sent out as the very substance of nurture and sustenance.

This is what our story insists upon us. This is what Christ crucified and resurrected reveals to us. And the world without this witness is but idealism, which burns out or sells out. The world without this witness is an impoverished world indeed, a starving world indeed.

People out there seem to suspect this is true. Even those who wouldn't, not even on a dare, join in for worship or join up with the church's common life: even some of them seem to sense this as true.

Charles Taylor, in his book that I love, *A Secular Age*, notices several times “how tourist itineraries are drawn to the cathedrals and temples of the past. [And] this might be,” he allows, “because people are fascinated by the past, and the only past we have is religious.” But he seems to suspect it’s something other than that, it’s something about how only as a tourist do many people permit themselves admission to a more awesome reality than what tends to be available to us in the day-to-day. It’s as if people want not just tasks but inspiration. It’s as if people want not just the workaday world but also blessing that the work might be something other than mere toil.

This is the same discovery we made in Monterey when word got out that we as a church might close. We didn’t have a date in mind. We didn’t have a deadline. We just knew this as a possibility because we were in touch with reality. But when word got out beyond the congregation about this, people in town were unnerved. They wanted us to keep on keeping on, though why, they probably wouldn’t have been able to say.

This is the discovery we’ve made in Lenox as we’ve reached out to stakeholders in town. Regarding the future of our buildings, which is intertwined with the future of the church, people have leapt to respond. Everybody loves the buildings, and everybody loves that they’re not simply private holdings in town, that they’re somehow also publicly held, open to all should some need arise, though what that need might be people could only hardly say. We might yet close. We could fade away to nothing. We know this as a possibility because we’re in touch with reality. But no one seems to want that—neither within the congregation, nor (and more powerfully) those beyond the congregation. So, as of now, we’re as five loaves of bread awaiting blessing that what needs press upon us we might yet abound so to fulfill.

It’s easier to think of ourselves as the ones active, the ones powerful to act as agents of transformation and change. It’s something else to consider ourselves as that which awaits being acted upon.

But sit with that for a moment.

Be the bread, those broken lumps pulled from sacks and pockets, not much until blessed.

Not much.

Just enough.

Thanks be to God.