

9 Pentecost, Proper 13, Yr. A
August 2, 2020
Matthew 14:13-21

Today's Gospel is a very familiar one, but before we look once more at the story of the loaves and fishes, I'd ask you to look with me first at that opening sentence: Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. One of the helpful suggestions for Bible reading is that one should always look at the context of a particular passage – where is it placed, what came before it and, of course, why would it have been placed exactly there? In this case, what came before it was the beheading of John the Baptist. John's disciples have just come and told Jesus what has happened. And so, the text says: Jesus withdrew from there to a deserted place by himself. He needed time alone, presumably to grieve, think and pray. Some Biblical commentators point to this as a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Scholars think that Jesus was not only John's cousin but also, at least, for a time, John's disciple. John – who called for repentance, the one who spoke truth to power, the one who was on fire with the love of God and the one who paid with his life. Just a few Sundays ago, Jesus was talking about the coming of the Kingdom. You'll remember two powerful similes: the Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and

then, in his joy, he went and sold all that he had in order to buy that field. Or again, the Kingdom is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. On finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all he had and bought it. These two similes have something in common – they both point to the fact that the person involved was willing to give up everything else in order to get the treasure. And John has done just that. He paid, finally, with his life.

If we look at all this from the point of view of the human Jesus, who has heard about John's death, we see someone who recognizes that the ante has just been upped for his own ministry. All of a sudden it's not a matter of preaching to receptive crowds in the countryside, now there's an understanding that being faithful to his mission and ministry could demand everything, could demand his very life. So the human Jesus wants to withdraw, to grieve, to pray, to struggle with this new insight. But it appears from the text that he didn't have much of a chance to do that because when he went ashore, the crowds were there before him and, we're told, HE HAD COMPASSION FOR THEM AND CURED THEIR SICK. So his compassionate heart made the decision for him and he moved to a deeper understanding of the cost of his ministry.

One other principle of Biblical interpretation is that, in reading the Bible, we should always ask ourselves:

what is this passage saying about God, what it is saying about humans and, finally, what is it saying about me? And what I'd like to suggest is that we, like Jesus, have those times when we recognize that these Christian lives of ours, our desire to follow Jesus, our deep desire for a relationship with God, are going to require more than we had thought at first. Are going to require, in fact, nothing short of everything we have and everything we are.

A friend of mine used to say that she thought of God as a giant magnet, drawing everything to himself. I always liked that image. Thinking about it, it seems that part of our job, then, is to try to cooperate with that magnetic movement and to be sure that we empty our pockets, as it were, of whatever is fighting against that movement, whatever is weighing me down, interfering with the movement toward God.

Do you remember the Bill Bryson book, *A Walk in the Woods*? It about two guys, the author and an equally unfit friend who decide to walk the Appalachian Trail. They get all their supplies and end up with two very sizeable packs. As the first day progresses, Bill's friend falls farther and farther behind and Bill's waits on the trail become longer and longer. Finally, he sits and waits for a very long time and when his friend finally shows up, he looks better than he has for most of the day. Turns out, in a subsequent conversation, that he's lightened his pack and thrown out everything

he considered extraneous. That turned out to be most of the food, except for the raisins, the noodles and the Snickers bars. As you might imagine, this isn't welcome news to Bill and is much less welcome as they eat meal after meal of noodles and raisins. In somewhat the same vein, Annie Dillard, in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, uses polar expeditions as metaphors for our journey to God. In one essay, she talks about the Franklin expedition of 1845. She says that each of the 3 ships carried only a 12 day supply of coal for the entire voyage, which was expected to last 2 or 3 years. Instead of additional coal, each ship made room for a 1200 volume library, a hand organ, china place settings, cut-glass wine goblets and sterling silver flatware. Many of the officers had silver of ornate Victorian design, with heavy handles and rich patterns. Engraved on the handles were their initials and family crests. We know this because their bodies were found later with the supplies they had decided to carry with them. Their ships were frozen in the polar ice cap and some tried to walk to safety. On search party, years later, reported that, accompanying one clump of frozen bodies were place settings of this same silver and a piece of a backgammon board which Lady Franklin had given her husband as a parting gift. One wonders, first, why they would, in those extreme conditions, choose to carry silver flatware, but then one wonders further, what it is that we're carrying that is equally useless and that weighs

us down and absorbs our energy unnecessarily - what's in our minds or memories or hearts: What should we be leaving behind?

With all that as background, the story of feeding the 5,000. The same interpretation techniques that permit us to look at Christ from either the human side or the divine side, allow to look at miracles the same way. I once heard a sermon preached in which the minister expressed his deep chagrin at the suggestion that, instead of some divine intervention that meant that Jesus suspended the usual workings of the physical universe and multiplied the physical matter of the loaves and fishes, there was the more human interpretation that somehow Jesus was able to open and minds and hearts of his listeners that day in such a way that they each opened the satchels they had brought and shared everything they had with everyone else. Frankly, I think that is just as much a miracle. In fact, knowing who we are and our often-instinctive selfishness, I would say that opening those human minds and hearts, leading to the opening of those picnic baskets was the greater miracle.

I'd point out one further thing about this text. That final line says that there were 5,000 men, BESIDES women and children. In other words, the women and children weren't counted. Two things about that. First of all, it's possible that the men were so intrigued by Jesus that they just dropped everything and

followed him but, as has been pointed out, no woman would go along without bringing the family's supply for the day – you know, a bag filled with food, water, diapers, something to keep the kids busy. The second thing about this is to stop and think about who's not counted in a given situation. If I'm right, in this story, if it was the women who had the resources and who shared them, then there's a point to be made that we need to be careful about who we COUNT and who we are leaving out of the count. Because we could be leaving out the ones who have the experience or the wisdom or the truth or the vision for going forward.

Finally, what does this story tell us about God? For sure it tells us that God, in the person of Jesus, meets our needs – he has compassion, the text tells us, and cured the sick and fed the hungry. It also tells us that Jesus, that person filled with the spirit of God, was a person of abundance. Not just abundance in the sense of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, but in the deeper sense that he was so alive and so loving and so expansive that somehow he was able to move others to that same vision of abundant life.

Moving to that broader vision, that there's enough for everyone, that vision of abundance, removes the barriers of selfishness that say WELL, I HAVE MINE, YOU ALL CAN WORRY ABOUT YOURSELVES. But beyond that, Jesus' life was about erasing barriers of

all kinds, between Jews and Gentiles, between men and women, between rich and poor.

These feeding stories are often seen as forerunners to the Eucharist where Jesus broke another barrier, the one separating us from God. “Take this bread and this wine, he says, which are my body and my blood, allow it to become part of you and then you do the same, taking your body and blood and pouring them out for others.”

That will mean different things at different times. Sometimes it will mean emptying our pockets, or sharing with someone when you’d rather ask them why they didn’t have the forethought to make provision for themselves, or maybe it will mean erasing barriers created by old wrongs or old prejudices or old fears. Or maybe it will mean doing something that will increase the joy and the abundance and the love in the world and in your own life. Whatever it is, it will be a blessing. Amen.