

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
August 2, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus withdrew 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. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." 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. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

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A parishioner told me of an experience he had at a church one Sunday in which the priest asked for everyone in the congregation, during the reading of the Nicene Creed, to stand when they read the portions of the Creed that they agreed with, and sit at the parts of the Creed with which they disagreed.

All stood as the Creed began, "We believe in one God"...but on the second line when the congregation read, "The Father", a few people sat down, because their relationships with their biological fathers had been troublesome, and they didn't like to think of God as a father figure.

As the congregation read “the Almighty”, a few others sat down, because their conception of God wasn’t of a deity who was all-powerful. Others sat at “maker of heaven and earth”, because they had studied science and they couldn’t reconcile what they knew about astrophysics and evolution with what a literal reading of Genesis teaches about the creation of the world.

Most stood for “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God”, because they didn’t know exactly what to disagree with. Some couldn’t imagine that Jesus “became incarnate from the Virgin Mary”, so they took their seats then. Others were skeptical of Jesus’ resurrection on the third day, so they sat down. Most everyone stood to read, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church”, because, I suppose, if they didn’t believe in church, they wouldn’t have been there. And at the anticipation of “the life of the world to come” they all stood, because in varying ways everyone gathered on that particular morning professed hope for some kind of new life.

We are a people who bring with us the meaning behind what we profess to believe. We are a people who can interpret creeds and prayers and scripture in widely divergent ways and hold in our minds and hearts very different conceptions of the way God works in the world. Yet each Sunday, now in the season of Corona, we stand six feet apart, and say words that signal to those around us that we are all children of God, that we are united by love and respect for one another and that we are a people joined together, not by mere belief, but by a common faith.

And so it is when we read scripture – particularly a story like the one we just heard from the Gospel of Matthew - the feeding of the 5000. We all bring our own agenda to church and so we all hear the gospel in a different way.

The story begins with Jesus withdrawing in a boat to a deserted place by himself. Now that is a Jesus I really get. After a week like this one with too much death and too many demands, my desire for solitude kicks in, and I fully understand Jesus' need to get away from it all.

And when I witness the stress and anxiety present in our community, I want people to take note of Jesus' example and take advantage of the time alone we have been granted, to experience God in the tranquility of a deserted place.

Matthew tells us that "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick." Those of us who are engaged in compassionate work, particularly those who practice the healing and caring professions, can relate to Jesus' compassionate side. We can understand a Jesus who gets out of the boat, leaving his soothing solitude behind and gets on with the practical business of healing the sick.

Or maybe we can identify with the disciples' earthly concerns. They can see that they are in a deserted place, surrounded by thousands of hungry people, with no markets nearby, no food vendors. The situation could easily get out of hand. Any level-headed person could see that the crowd needed to be dispersed and sent away to the villages to buy their own food.

The disciples knew that Jesus sometimes had his head in the clouds, and needed to occasionally be brought back down to earth. That makes sense to many of us.

But rejecting their practical argument, Jesus says to the disciples, "...you give them something to eat." The heading in many translations of this story often reads something like, "Jesus feeds the 5000". In fact, Jesus only fed the twelve, the twelve fed the five thousand. Despite their protest that they only had "five loaves and two fish", the disciples themselves were the ones who did the feeding. And those among us who pay attention to the hunger in our midst, hunger, not just for food, but hunger for decent housing, a living wage, for health care, and for education, Jesus command to his disciples resonates, and we strive to follow the disciples' example and become the hands and feet of Jesus.

And when we read in this story how Jesus took the bread and fish, and he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples, how can we not think of communion?

In fact, it has been suggested that among early Christians this story was read regularly at the Eucharist. For those of us steeped in Episcopal tradition, the Eucharist is the centerpiece of our worship, it is where we are fed, nurtured spiritually, and experience Christ's presence among us in its most substantive form. For many, this sacred moment is the point of the story, and we miss it so much.

After the disciples distributed the fish and bread to the crowd, "all ate and were filled". For those among us who are hungry, empty, lost, lonely, loveless, or in sorrow we long to be a part of the crowd that was fed that evening by Jesus. When a person is hungry, nothing else really matters.

And when we get to the end of the story, Matthew tells us that, "Those who ate were about 5000 men, not counting the women and children." And those among us who are concerned with issues of social justice are compelled to ask, "What do you mean, not counting women and children? Don't they have to eat too? Why don't women and children count?"

And we are once again reminded that in Jesus day, just as in our own, there are those at the margins of society who don't really count, who have no voice, and are at the mercy of the powerful. Even in a story of abundance, we are reminded of scarcity.

Taken as a whole, this story of an afternoon in the life of Jesus and his disciples, points us in the direction of a full and balanced life. We all want something from our Jesus, but this story of a picnic by the sea compels us to ask what Jesus wants for us? Maybe Jesus wants to give us what we need, rather than what we want. Or just maybe, we need to ask what the world needs from us, rather than what we need.

It might be our natural inclination to withdraw to the desert and ignore the cries of hunger around us. Or maybe we try to respond to every cry for help we hear, when what we really need to do is withdraw to the desert for a time and let go of all the excessive demands that threaten our well-being.

Maybe we think we need to be fed, when in fact we need to be the one doing the feeding.

Or maybe church for us has been all about the Eucharist and we've ignored the hungry crowd waiting outside.

It's easy enough, when we read scripture, to find words and examples that fit our preconceived notions of who we are and how we think the world works. But Jesus is always pushing us beyond what we think we know.

When reading scripture, I urge you to listen to the words that don't naturally resonate with you, that don't seem to quite ring true, that challenge who you are and what you believe.

As Christians, we are called to transformation. And transformation happens in a land beyond belief. It's a deserted place and a crowded place. A place where God's people are fed and they feed others. A place where the healed and the healers come together. It's a place where God spreads a table and mortals eat of the bread of angels.