

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.

Be Scared and Do it Anyway - August 22, 2020

Matthew 14:13-21

I am sure that most of us are familiar with the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people. It is certainly one of the more memorable stories of Jesus' ministry. The story has been used repeatedly to show how God provides resources for us even when we see nothing at all. I hope for many of us we have seen God at work in our own lives providing for us seemingly out of nothing.

There have been many explanations trying to answer the question where the food came from. Some say Jesus created it out of nothing, just like God created the universe out of nothing. Other say the people had food with them already but it took Jesus' example of sharing his own food with the people to persuade the crowds to break open what they had brought for themselves and share it with others. We will never know exactly what happened, but it doesn't really matter, does it? The point of the feeding story is that when Jesus is present, good things happen. When we allow ourselves to trust God to intervene, God will. As we see in the story of the feeding of the 5000, the disciples had no idea where the food came from. They had no idea how Jesus was going to intervene. But they believed that when Jesus instructed them to feed the people, Jesus would show them what to do.

But today I don't want to focus on what Jesus did for the 5000, but what Jesus himself was experiencing before, during, and after his encounter with the crowd.

It is very easy for us to fall into the habit of thinking about Jesus as Superman. Jesus swoops around, healing someone here, feeding another there, speaking words that everyone is amazed by and agrees that they are the wisest things they ever heard. Very rarely do we think about the fact that Jesus was a human being. A human being like us. Jesus had doubts. Jesus had fears. Jesus was opposed by many. Not everyone automatically accepted his message and even those that did often fell away.

In the words of the late John Lewis, Jesus spent his ministry "causing good trouble." He challenged the status quo. He argued with the leaders. He asked his followers and his hearers to think about life and living in new ways.

And he got a lot of pushback.

Jesus's message of unconditional love and acceptance is as hard to understand now as it was two thousand years ago. Many of us may consider ourselves to be open and loving people. We try to be welcoming in our own lives. We try to be welcoming as a church. But for all of us, we have lines that we will not cross. Every one of us will encounter Jesus and Jesus will ask us to do something, accept

somebody, or go somewhere. And we just refuse. We say, “No, Lord, you are asking too much of me. I can follow you sometimes, even most of the time, but not all the time.

Jesus was never unconditionally followed, even by his own disciples. His message always met opposition, and still does, even from us gathered today. Jesus was well acquainted with opposition from the beginning of his ministry and when we begin the story of Jesus’ feeding the five thousand, he was in the process of recovering from one of the most threatening experiences of his ministry.

Our scripture today opens with the words, “Jesus withdrew in a boat to be by himself.” That’s a strange way to begin a story, isn’t it? Jesus withdrew. Obviously our first question is what is causing Jesus to withdraw in a boat by himself? Normally, he is out with his disciples and preaching and teaching and healing. But as we begin this story, Jesus is going in the opposite direction, all by himself. Why?

Jesus wanted to get away because he was, in part, quite scared. We don’t like to think about Jesus as being scared, but he was. Again, because we tend to forget Jesus was a human being just like us, he experienced the same feelings we feel and at that moment he was scared.

Why was Jesus scared? Because he had just learned that his cousin, friend, and fellow preacher, John the Baptizer, had been killed by King Herod. John is one of the first people we meet once Jesus began his ministry. After John baptized Jesus, he continued to preach the Word of God and John did not spare anyone, even King Herod. John accused Herod of breaking Jewish law by marrying the wrong woman and John was not afraid to accuse Herod loudly and often.

Herod knew John was right, but also knew John was very popular among the people so Herod was afraid to touch John. This tense state of affairs continued until Herod’s wife manipulated Herod into having John arrested and killed. Let this be a warning to anyone who preaches truth to power. Eventually, power will react and power is not afraid of hurting or killing those who dare to challenge. So it continues to the present day.

Jesus certainly knew that his message was controversial. While he was loved by the ordinary people, he already had enemies in the Jewish religious establishment. Jesus was very critical of the hypocrisy of the priests and pharisees and scribes and made it clear to his followers that they were to listen to the words of the Jewish leadership but not copy their actions. Jesus was very much in the mold of John the Baptizer. Jesus was unafraid to speak truth to power.

Nevertheless, Jesus was hardly naive. He predicted from the beginning of his ministry that someday his words would catch up with him and he would be arrested, tried, and killed for what he was doing

and saying. He knew that trouble was coming his way, nonetheless, it didn't make it any easier when he saw for himself how John was killed for telling the truth.

God has given a ministry to every one of us. Yes, you may not think so, but the God who made you and loves you also has a plan for you. I suspect many of us know what God's plan is for us, but we do our best to ignore it or evade it. Why? Why would we avoid God's plan for our lives? Because we know, just like all the prophets before us. Just like John. Just like Jesus. We know that God's plan for our lives will require us to do things, say things, and go places that we don't want to do or say or go to. Doing God's work is very fulfilling and very satisfying. However, I would be lying to you if I didn't also say that doing God's work can be very challenging and very stressful at times.

When Jesus heard about John's death, you better believe he was stressed. It's one thing to speak abstractly about being punished or killed for your actions and beliefs, it's quite another to know someone personally who was actually punished, actually killed for doing the same things you are doing.

Isn't it interesting that during our Covid crisis that many who are on record as saying the virus is just a hoax magically change their minds when they themselves or a close friend or family member gets it. Suddenly, it all becomes real. This could happen to me!

Such was the case of Jesus and John. John's fate made Jesus realize that doing God's work had dangerous consequences. He could be killed. Not way off in the future, but very, very soon.

Can we understand, then, why Jesus wanted to withdraw by himself? He very much wanted, very much needed to be alone, to be with God, to assess what he was doing and most importantly, renew himself and summon the strength and courage to carry on.

Alas, Jesus's desire was not to be. As much as he desperately needed rest and needed to recharge, he couldn't. Jesus wanted to get away but he didn't. Instead, he put aside his own needs and dove back into ministry because the people needed him and he had compassion for them.

Every day, we see stories on TV about medical professionals in desperate need of rest, bombarded daily with life-and-death decisions, and watching powerlessly as people die in the ICU wards. We see them put aside their own personal needs and show up at work and work extra hours and deliberately expose themselves to the possibility of infection and force themselves to watch people die. Why do they do it? Because they, like Jesus, have compassion for their patients.

I said at the beginning that Jesus is not Superman. He was a human being very much like us. After Jesus fed the 5000, he did take time to be with God, time alone, time to reflect, recharge, and experience God's love and support once more.

So what can we say about this incident? Am I encouraging you to go and go and go until you collapse? I hope not. We are human beings and we have to be aware that we are not Superman and we are not perfect and we are limited in how much we can do and how long we can go without resting.

On the other hand, we also have to recognize that our choosing to be here in the worship service today means that we want to know more about what it means to not only follow Jesus but be like Jesus in what we say and do in this life. And as this story demonstrates, following Jesus is not an easy thing all the time. Following Jesus will always place us in a struggle between our wants and God's needs. There will be times when we feel tired. There will be times when we feel powerless. There will be times when we feel scared. There is nothing wrong with feeling tired, and powerless, and scared. Jesus himself felt these things.

Now perhaps more than ever, it is easy to get burned out. It is easy to just want to walk away from church, from relationships, from work, from family, from everything because it is just too much, way too much. I want to assure you again that Jesus himself felt these things and if he could feel these emotions, you can too. That is good news!

It is good news because Jesus knew as we can know, that we don't have to make our way in this world alone. We do not have to rely exclusively on our own resources. We do get burned out, but we get that way because we are burning ourselves up without allowing ourselves to get recharged. Somehow, we've made it a crime, a sin, a fault, to admit we are tired and we need to rest and recharge.

But friends, burnout is only a sin, a fault, and a crime when we refuse to ask for God's help and allow God back into our burned out, fearful, and depleted lives to recharge us and revive us. It is a sin, a terrible sin because by not asking God for help to revive us, we are saying we don't need God in our lives to help us get on with the work God has selected us to do. We are not trusting God to know and love and care and guide us when we are exhausted.

Jesus knew that he could not do his ministry alone. There are many times in the gospels when Jesus did have to postpone his need for rest, but each time, he did make time to get away with his God and revive himself spiritually.

I invite you to also follow the path of reviving yourself spiritually because we all need it from time to time. Our church offers an online ten minute Daily Prayer service that you can access anytime on our website. We offer a thirty minute service of contemplation called Taizé which is also accessible anytime. These are a few of the tools we provide to help you move closer to God and release your burden of burnout. Try. Please try. Jesus knew and you should know that you don't have to go it alone. As the 5000 knew, as we should know, when Jesus is with us, good things happen.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.