

Lectionary 18 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 2, 2020

Matthew 14:13-21; Psalm 145:16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The last time our congregation had public worship was March 8. This coming Saturday, August 8, will be five months without a public worship service. When this got started, I thought that at the most, it would be a two month shutdown. And I'm not just talking about our congregation's worship. Although that's definitely a big deal for me. I'm talking about the whole disruption to American life in 2020.

Every plan that I made, both in work and in my personal life, has been delayed indefinitely or completely cancelled. Graduations did not happen. Weddings, birthdays, funerals. Mother's Day, Father's Day, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July. We're five weeks from Labor Day, and I assume it will be ruined as well. The start of a new school year, disrupted and delayed. Happy hour is cancelled, along with dating and dancing. Elective surgeries postponed. You can't visit people who live in retirement communities. No summer blockbuster movies, no concerts, no family reunions in the mountains. What have I forgotten? What have you lost? I have my health and I have my job, which makes me more fortunate than many, many others. And still I've lost a lot. What have you lost? How much? And how much can ever be restored?

This is some of the baggage that I bring to church. This is some of the baggage that I bring to the Bible, to today's gospel reading. One of the most familiar stories about Jesus. The feeding of the five thousand is in all four gospels. The feeding of the four thousand is in two gospels. It's a big, important story, theologically. It's a compelling story for children, so it lives on in our imaginations alongside Goldilocks and Little Red Riding Hood and Aladdin. So it's a familiar story for Christians. A landmark that we visit numerous times.

But this time I was struck by the opening of the story. "Now when Jesus heard this." Our worship materials put in some brackets and explain what "this" is. Now when Jesus heard *about the beheading of John the Baptist*. It's a whole gruesome story, that took Matthew twelve verses to describe. *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.*

So when we approach this landmark story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, in our context of the Covid pandemic shutdown and quarantine, I am sensitive to the fact that Jesus and his followers are in a crisis. Jesus has lost something. He's lost his friend, his kinsman, his fellow prophet and preacher. And furthermore, it may seem as though Jesus will be next. Herod, who

imprisoned and executed John, is troubled by the similarity between John and Jesus. So what stands out is that Jesus is seeking to escape. Trying to get away to a deserted place to grieve his loss; perhaps trying to get away not only from the crowds but from the unwelcome attention of the authorities that the crowds might attract.

That's really the grim and sober context of this story, of this miracle. Jesus attempting to escape. But the crowds follow him. In the gospels the Sea of Galilee is sometimes a buffer between Jesus and the crowds, sometimes a useful barrier. And he's escaped on the boat. In Mark's version of this story, Jesus says to the Twelve, who have themselves just returned from a tour of the mission field, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while." So it's a retreat for him and his followers. But the crowds come out from the towns and are waiting for them when they come ashore. Matthew says Jesus "had compassion for them and cured their sick." So his retreat or his escape has been thwarted by the needs of the crowd, their physical ailments and need for healing. And this day drags on. One person after another. One broken life, following another tragedy, following someone in great anguish. He spends the day healing them. And it's sunset. And that's when the question of food and hunger arises.

So what I feel as I read this story again— as we encounter it again as the church— what I feel is the burnout. And the uncertainty. And the desperation. I'm not talking about me as a pastor, or me as your pastor, or me as the pastor of this congregation. I'm talking about how I feel as a person and as a member of a civilization. And I daresay how many of you feel. Probably even more so than me, many of you. Exhausted. Discouraged. And anxious.

So what I resonate with in this story is not the physical hunger— dinner time, lots of food coming forth, leftovers. I resonate with everyone's exhaustion. The hunger that is emotional. Starting with the Twelve. Who have been on the go, and this was supposed to have been a break for them. And they are the ones telling Jesus to send the crowds home. Call it a day. So the Twelve are burned out. There's Jesus himself, who's actually doing the healing, actually engaging with the pain. Jesus, contemplating the death of his partner in mission, his peer, John the Baptist. And then there's the crowd. Traipsing along the path, following along the shoreline. The sick people, and the people carrying the sick people.

What strikes me this time is how Jesus orders the crowd to sit down. This is a crowd the size of the Hollywood Bowl. I guess they've been thronging around Jesus all day. Standing, moving, possibly some pushing and shoving. Jesus didn't invite them to sit, or suggest that they sit. He commanded them to sit. I think that changes the mood. From thronging to sitting. And then Jesus does the spiritual thing of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. He gives the bread to the disciples, who then give it to the people. So the disciples actually do the feeding of the five thousand. There's no doubt that Jesus made the difference. But the Twelve fed the five thousand. And then there were twelve baskets left over.

When I was a young man, my pastor had a bumper sticker on his car. It said, "Bread happens." You know the other bumper sticker, the other expression: "Stuff happens." You know what I'm

talking about. But my pastor's bumper sticker said, "Bread happens."

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (plus women and children, so more like ten thousand) harkens back to Moses and the manna in the wilderness. A miracle that shows that God provides. People like Matthew and the other writers of the New Testament probably hope that we will see how Jesus is like Moses, and like Elisha, who also fed the crowds miraculously with bread [2 Kings 4:42-44]. But manna, the miracle of Exodus, shows that God provides. Enough. Always enough. Not to hoard, but to satisfy. *"You open wide your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing."* (Our psalm refrain today.)

So in this Covid epidemic, where so many of us are fatigued and burned out. Lost like sheep without a shepherd. Anxious about what tomorrow may bring. But still trying to do our best. Trying to be good people. Caring for others as we are able. Washing our hands, wearing our masks, trying to stay six feet apart. Day after day, Week after week. Month after month. For us, this story promises that bread happens. Sometimes God in Christ tells us to feed the crowd. Use what you've got, listen to Jesus, and feed his sheep. [John 21:15-17] Sometimes God is Christ commands us to sit down. Sit down and be fed.

Just four weeks ago, in this same gospel according to Matthew, Jesus said "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." [Matthew 11:28] We are all weary and carrying heavy burdens, but his yoke is easy and his burden is light. And bread happens. When we need it most. His bread happens for us. Amen.