

**Sunday, August 2, 2020**  
**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Mr. Ed Keithly, Diocesan Vocational Development Minister**

Jesus is alone in a boat.

Confronted with upsetting news, he's withdrawn, rowed out by himself to a deserted place.

Jesus has just learned that John the Baptist, his friend, the voice crying out in the wilderness, the man who told of Christ's coming, the man who baptized Jesus, has been killed by King Herod.

So Jesus does something that's familiar to all of us after receiving jarring, upsetting news: We do the only thing we can think to do—cast off to a deserted place.

Any deserted place will do: a quiet park, a bedroom, a bathroom, a closet, even some lonely recess in our mind. Anywhere where we can be alone with our thoughts, to process what we've just heard—to cry or to shout or to bargain, to rationalize or to fret.

We find a quiet place in order to start – if we can – to grieve, to imagine the world we will now be asked to inhabit. A world without a dear friend in it, without a family member, a colleague, maybe a world without someone we'd loved once and never had a chance to reconcile with.

And, even before John's death, things weren't going especially well for Jesus. In fact this passage from Matthew falls squarely in the middle of a set of passages my fancy Bible commentary calls "Ministry in a Hostile Environment."

"Ministry in a Hostile Environment," begins, of all places, at home. Jesus returns home to Nazareth to prophesy and teach. Even though his fellow Nazarenes are impressed with his preaching, they can't get over their low expectations of him. They say, "*Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son?*" They go on to drag his entire family.

Instead of being received for his words and deeds, Jesus finds himself rebuked by his own because they can't get past where he comes from—can't get past the idea that he's acting above his station.

And this sounds a lot like the racism, sexism, prejudice that infects our country. Jesus can't be seen for his words and deeds, he has to be seen through the lens of his lineage, his social station, his skin color, the narrow and stifling roles society tries to set at his feet.

It's hard for me to imagine how demoralizing it would be to be treated this way. Or maybe not—if the good people of Good Shepherd, Burke, or St. Peter's in the Woods, Fairfax

Station, decided to send me some hate mail after this sermon, I think I'd understand a little. (Please don't, though.)

Jesus is derided by his own people. Immediately after, he learns of the death of John the Baptist, his fellow revolutionary, attempting to break the bonds of exploitation, of the caste system of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine. The man who baptized Christ himself has been put to death by the same powers Jesus is fighting.

And so, Jesus withdraws to a deserted place. Maybe he weeps, or shouts, or curses. Certainly he prays, he mourns. Feeling literally and metaphorically adrift, Jesus must wonder what should or can come next. Fully divine, he must know; fully man, he must doubt.

And, then, Jesus is faced with an answer, an opportunity:

Hearing that Jesus is nearby in his dinghy, a crowd starts to form on shore. I like to imagine here that Jesus is laid down flat in his boat, literally adrift, contemplating his friend John's death and his own ministry, and hears a growing sound coming from shore. Jesus pops his head over the side of his boat and sees the growing crowd. He rows towards them, steps out, and walks among them on the shore.

"When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."

*He had compassion for them.* Christ's compassion is what draws him out of the boat, away from the deserted place.

After Jesus heals the sick, Jesus' disciples, who seemingly appear out of nowhere, ask, "OK, so should we send them home?"

And this is the point at which Jesus' grief turns towards action. He says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

The disciples respond, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

Jesus tells the disciples, "Bring me that bread and fish, and tell everyone to sit down on the grass (preferably in household units with six feet of distance between each)."

"Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus 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."

In the Gospel of Matthew, this is the first time that Jesus has addressed physical hunger. It's here that Jesus extends his ministry from the first principal sacrament – Baptism – towards

the second – the Eucharist. Of course at this passage of the Gospel we’re not yet to the institution of the Eucharistic Feast, but we’re certainly pointing towards it:

“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.”

Blessed, broken, given.

Jesus grieves. Jesus sees. Jesus has compassion. Jesus feeds five thousand and then some with food to spare.

Blessed, broken, given.

And there’s an act of defiance that shouldn’t be overlooked here: John the Baptist was gruesomely put to death by King Herod to appease a few nobles attending a banquet held by the King. Jesus returns from his grief and responds with his own banquet: A banquet of simplicity, compassion, generosity. A banquet not just set for the elite few.

And I hope it’s not heresy to say that I don’t think Jesus literally multiplied the loaves and fishes; I don’t think that’s what the text says. What Jesus says is for the disciples to give away what they have, and I think that act of generosity inspires others who have more than they need to give to those who have little.

The true miracle is the way that Jesus’ grief transforms to compassion, which gives way to generosity, the way that generosity begets more generosity, and on and on until everyone has enough, with food to spare.

\* \* \*

And where, I wonder, are we, as a Church, supposed to locate ourselves in this story?

Preaching to you from my home office in the 130<sup>th</sup> day of physical distancing, it’s easy for me to identify with Jesus adrift on a boat in a deserted place.

Like Jesus, I’m also grieving a loss. I’m fortunate enough to not have experienced the worst of Corona Virus up close, and I pray that remains true for me and for you, but I still grieve the loss of the old patterns of my life—work, friends, church.

But I can’t delude myself in to thinking that things in the Church were all coming up roses before the pandemic. Like Jesus’ message being derided by his fellow Nazarenes, every single church I’ve worked with or been a member of has been faithfully struggling with some version of the same questions for years:

- How can we make our message and ministry matter in our neighborhood?
- And why does it seem like we don’t matter, or at least matter less than we used to?

It's comforting, I think, to imagine that Jesus was struggling with some of the same questions before the feeding of the 5,000.

And though we grieve, crowds of people in need await us on the shore, in our neighborhoods. Crowds protesting the mistreatment and murder of Black Americans; crowds in need of care and feeding as the most vulnerable bear the brunt of the economic downturn; crowds crying out that they're lonely, that they can't make sense of this new world we find ourselves in.

The Church has been handed an answer, an opportunity, to respond out of our collective grief. To joyfully follow Christ to shore and set a banquet, not for the elite few, but for the crowds crying out to be seen, to be heard, to be believed, to be loved.

I, we, the Church is being presented with an opportunity to transform our grief to compassion, to Christ-like compassion, to look – even virtually – in to the eyes of our neighbor and see their hurt and need, to pray and listen and learn and then respond.

We may still feel adrift, alone in our deserted places, but when we're ready to row back to shore, know that Christ has already gone ahead of us, not to welcome us back to the Church we knew, but to welcome us all in to new life around Christ's table. A table where all who eat will be filled, where those who have too much give to those who have too little—it was all God's in the first place.

Blessed, broken, given. We will have our fill. We will have enough. We will have new life.

Amen.