

August 2, 2020

“Keep Calm & Feed On”

Matt. 14:13-21

Food. Food, and sharing it together is powerful in many ways, in feeding our bodies, but also, symbolically, in feeding our spirits. Isn't the offering and sharing of food, whatever bit of food we have, at the heart of hospitality, just as much as offering shelter, just as much as inviting someone in? Isn't it good for our soul when we can share a meal together with friends and loved ones? I know I am missing meals with friends and those glorious church potlucks! That is one poignant loss of this pandemic: we can't easily or safely share a meal with those we love, work with or those we might like to know better. Sharing food satisfies a basic human need and brings us together.

That seems to be what this story, told by all four Gospel writers, is about: Jesus, meeting our most basic human needs, our deepest hungers. Feeding the hungry (not just ourselves but a hungry world) is also at the core of the gospel: as Fred Craddock reminds us, Jesus told us that "the question, What did you do in the face of human hunger? would be on the final exam (Matt 25:35)" (*Preaching through the Christian Year A*). In this story, Jesus sets an example for us (in school we used to call this "giving us a study sheet"), but even then he worked through his disciples, just as he works through us today. (Kathryn Matthews, *Sermon Seeds*)

First, let's set the scene: things have not been going well in Jesus' ministry, so he has to teach in parables; that way, the insiders--his followers who presumably have ears to hear--will know what he's saying, and the powerful outsiders won't. Still, in his hometown, even his own people "took offense at him" (13:57). Then Jesus receives horrific news that John the Baptist has been murdered, "beheaded" to be exact by Herod (the powers-that-be at work). A certain tension arises between two meals: on one hand, Herod the guilty has thrown a big birthday party for himself, a feast for his cronies, ending with the murdered John's head served "on a platter" (14:11). That meal is marked by lust for many things, including blood, and unfolds into the horrific murder of a great man. Even Herod knows this, and "was grieved" (14:9). Food was there, and companions, yet this meal was surely not blessed. On the other hand, as Jesus withdraws to "a deserted place," the scene is set for a very different meal, with different hungers fed and a very different experience of power and of community. Both Herod and Jesus give commands, but one set of commands is **death-dealing and the other is life-sustaining**. (Matthews) How different we may hear this story with this powerful and prophetic insight.

What draws people into the company of a man like Herod, and what draws them into the company of a man like Jesus? Herod sits in a palace, with guards and

a prison below him. Jesus stands on a deserted hillside, far from the seat of one kind of power, but right at the heart of a much greater power. However, because Herod feels threatened by Jesus, or at least by "these powers at work in him," he becomes an even greater threat to Jesus (Roger E. Van Harn, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*). Fear is a most dangerous thing, and Herod is motivated by fear just as Jesus is moved by compassion. I dare say we don't have to look too hard to draw parallels with modern day powers that be.

Rev. Otis Moss III, Pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, recently wrote an article about the Christian response to the institutionalized racism and deployment of federal troops to Portland. He states that "America desires Jesus slogans over morally grounded Jesus-inspired action." He goes on to say,

White protesters in Portland were given a glimpse of how Black lives do not matter in the face of state-sanctioned violence. As a result, protests swelled in Portland and news coverage increased — not to highlight racial inequity, Black pain, or the racialized deployment of the police, but instead to highlight the horrific federal transgression of constitutional authority. The heightened sensitivity was again connected to America's historical lie reasserting itself. The outrage shifted from policy, defunding the police, reparations, courageous conversations on race, repentance, and what does justice look like in America to legitimate constitutional questions that again failed to acknowledge Black suffering....Again, white discomfort and pain was lifted up in the process. People of faith, those who claim Jesus, have a moral obligation and spiritual call to resist participation in this complicated social sin. How people of faith answer in this moment will determine the future of the American church.

These are some prophetic words that I'm willing to bet make us squirm, ready to protest in the streets or somewhere in between. How do we hear Rev. Moss' words as we reflect on the gospel as we read about what Jesus and his disciples did with bread on that hillside, especially as Jesus was grief-stricken and pained by the brutal events from Herod's orders that took the life of his spiritual companion and friend in John the Baptist? The words used by Matthew are familiar from the Last Supper account and from our own celebration of the Eucharist as well: the instructions are clear (take, bless, break and give) are simple but powerful, and apply to our lives just as they apply to the bread we share with one another and with the world.

In fact, this work of the church goes on in every age and every wilderness, for "the church is always in the desert," Thomas G. Long writes, "the place where it cannot rely upon its own resources, which are few. The church is hungry itself and is surrounded by a world of deep cravings" (*Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*).

I wonder if the church is in a new sort of wilderness as we continue living in a pandemic and in a nation that is polarized. We are tired, worn and grieving so much. This is a hard place we live in especially when there is no end in sight. Are we willing to walk through the wilderness? To go hungry trusting in God's provisions? We are getting hungrier and hungrier as are those around us- how will we "feed them" and ourselves with God's abundance?

Long's description of the church's resources as "few" is thought-provoking for those who embrace a theology of abundance. Most folks in churches (pastors and lay members alike) would say that their church "needs" more money, more members, more "help." Our perception is one of scarcity, even when we truly desire to act compassionately (the disciples around Jesus could have been motivated by compassion when they urged him to send the people into the villages for food). Again, we hear God's abundance just as we did last week as we dove into the power of parables and metaphors about God's Kin-dom.

More important than "how" the miracle worked is the "why," of course: Jesus' deep compassion for the suffering of the people, and his response. The "what" for us (the "so what?") is the command to go and do likewise, but how can we do likewise if there isn't enough to go around? Barbara Brown Taylor says that where the disciples saw scarcity, "Jesus operated under a different set of assumptions....Jesus knew beyond a shadow of a doubt...that wherever there was plenty of God there would be plenty of everything else" (*The Seeds of Heaven*).

But what about the "so what"? Barbara Brown Taylor has a problem with miracles that "mesmerize" us and lead us to take a back seat and leave everything up to God. "Miracles," she writes, "let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, do it all" (*The Seeds of Heaven*).

Are we really disciples of Jesus, following in his ways, responding as we believe God would respond to the need around us? Roger E. Van Harn says that our response is indeed a matter of discipleship, which is "not merely a matter of managing limited resources; it is a matter of giving what we have in faith, hope, and love in acts of worship" (*The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*).

I continue to be humbled and amazed at the stories of generosity and abundance. I'm amazed at our frontline workers who continue to care for others with shortages of Personal Protective Equipment. I continue to be more amazed at those who worked to make and donate masks and money and remind us that there is abundance. I'm awed by their expression of deep commitment to provide whatever care they can for those who suffering and in need. Instead of constricting

in the face of scarcity, they exhibit an incredible generosity of spirit. I think it's also important to note that nearly 700 front line workers have already given their lives to this struggle. According to one report, a majority of these were people of color. (Matthews)

And so, again, miracles don't happen unless WE participate, Taylor says: God tells us, "Stop waiting for food to fall from the sky and share what you have. Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead" (*The Seeds of Heaven*).

What do we hunger for most? What does it take to step out of our comfort zone? What indeed are our deepest needs: not our wants, but our needs? Perhaps bread, a simple and most necessary thing--both physically and spiritually--is indeed a powerful thing, and the sharing of it is at the heart of our life together in the church. So stop waiting on a miracle and be a part of the miracle that is waiting at every turn to burst forth. See the abundance and be generous. This is God's call to us as disciples and this is what it means to be the church. AMEN.