

What a beautiful story we have today in our gospel reading. It's a familiar story of multitudes being fed by Jesus. We hear of Jesus' compassion for the people, refusing to let the disciples send them away. We see in this story the way Jesus sees: With the disciples, we see not nearly enough, but he sees more than enough. Jesus' compassion, Jesus' provision, and hunger satisfied.

It was pointed out to me this week that the feeding of the 5000 in Matthew has a unique backdrop. It takes place in the wake of John the Baptist's death.

We hear that Herod is nervous about "this Jesus" because he fears that he is John the Baptist "raised from the dead." Matthew then describes John's death. It was Herod's birthday party - important guests, tons of food, and live entertainment. Herod had arrested John at the request of his sister in law Herodias because John was telling them that "Herod could not have her." He had arrested John but would not kill him because he was afraid of the crowd. But the daughter of Herodias danced at the party and pleased Herod so much that he promised her whatever she asked for. Herodias had her ask for the head of John. "The king was grieved," it says, "yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given..."

What a contrast to the feeding of 5000! The gathering of power, then the gathering of the hungry. The feeding of the few, then the feeding of the many. Status versus compassion. The power of pride, and the power of God.

Having heard of John's death, Jesus "withdrew to a deserted place." He wanted to be alone. His "cousin, herald, minister, and friend John the Baptist, the one with whom he once danced together in their respective mother's wombs..." had been murdered.¹ Jesus' grief over John's death is the backdrop to the feeding of the 5000.

¹ August 6, Ordinary 18A (Matthew 14:13-21) *There are no ideal conditions for a miracle.* Amey Victoria Adkins-Johns CC August 2023

This bit about Jesus withdrawing caught me. It's understandable that he'd want to be alone, that he'd want to take some space from all the healing and loving and raising, and grieve for John. But what caught me is that this reflex is a reflection of what we sometimes in church communities.

At the last church I served I met a man named Arvid one Sunday. He was ushering. He was the kind of churchgoer who stepped in when something needed to be done. He was the grandfather of some kids I worked with, so on my way into worship I introduced myself. We exchanged some small talk about his adult children and their kids before I walked in and grabbed a seat. Early the very next morning, Arvid died. I'd just met him and he was gone.

Lots of things happen when people die. There are tons of details to be dealt with by the family and the church, and all in the midst of grief. But as soon as it was all done, Arvid's family stopped showing up at church. After a year or two they started turning up here and there, but their presence was intermittent at best. And even when they did show up, they were "absent"- the last ones to arrive and the first out the door.

This is not an unusual thing at church. When something hard happens in life, (whether a death, an illness, etc.) people sometimes stop coming to church - we withdraw to a deserted place. There are lots of reasons this happens. Receiving everyone's sympathies and regretful stares can be overwhelming. Sometimes it's about sparing the community the awkward handshakes and words of comfort that are expected. Other times it's about sparing themselves the hollow platitudes that people sometimes reach for in an effort to comfort. I wonder if, too, the 'good news' sounds a bit hollow in the midst of grief - too incongruent to stomach. Whatever the reason, people tend to withdraw from church and community in the wake of something hard.

Jesus himself feels that impulse. He wants to be alone, to withdraw from the public eye and grieve. But the crowd won't let him go - they follow him. He's got "something" they need. Even if they can't quite describe it, they are receiving it in his presence, his teaching, his healing - only from him. So his "withdrawing" (even briefly) is too much to bear.

Getting out of the boat Jesus saw the great crowd and he had compassion for them. Even having compassion, Jesus could have let the disciples disperse the crowd - that would have allowed him the space he was after. But "when the disciples tell the people they should go and make way for themselves," Jesus says no - he "insists they remain gathered." He insists that they share a meal.²

This is a story about hunger - the hunger of human bodies to be sure, a hunger we all know. But also, it's about that hunger for which we have no words, a hunger that lives a little deeper down inside us. We know this hunger too. It was this hunger that drove the crowd after Jesus even when he wanted to be alone. It's this hunger that rears in us when hard things and hard losses take their toll, and what once seemed to satisfy no longer seems to suffice.

I suspect it's this hunger that drives us from church and community when we're in the midst of hardship. It's as though our hunger has no place among people who are still satisfied by what they receive here. When hard things come, and they do, what once seemed to satisfy can simply lose its power to do so again. The question of what will actually fill that "hole" is an enticing one when the tried and true disappoints. And so we go looking for it elsewhere.

² Ibid

Isaiah 55 was written to a people who thought they knew that for which they hungered. But once they got their desired food, their hunger remained.

Isaiah here is speaking to the exiles who've returned to Jerusalem. As exiles in Babylon, they had hungered for home - to live in the land they had been promised. But having finally returned after 50 years - having rebuilt the city walls, having rebuilt the temple - they realized the hunger remained. Unable to name it themselves, Isaiah describes it for them: Come all who thirst and hunger, all who have no money. What you're after is yours already, without money and without price. You spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy. What you need is already yours - so eat what is good and delight yourselves in [this] rich food.

Jesus sees the deep, existential hunger in the people gathered before him, and he sees that hunger in us. What is it that will satisfy? What is it that we hunger for? When Jesus "insists" the people remain gathered, he gives us a rare glimpse of what we're really after. He shows us his own hunger. But his hunger is different, for he knows what he's hungry for. It's you, it's us. Jesus' hunger is the very hunger of God for us. It's God's hunger for our lives, for our flourishing.

Discovering that hunger, a hunger outside of us and for us, is it this that they feasted on in that deserted place? Is it this that we feast on when we gather?

Jesus here reveals a God that does not stand at an observable distance. This is a God who took flesh and lived among us to know both our physical hunger and spiritual hunger, to know the joys of relationship and the grief that follows it, to know community and solitude - the depths and heights of human connection. And even in the midst of the swirl and mix and grief of human life together, a God that comes closer and hungers for us to hunger no more.

Walking into this deserted place, whatever your personal backdrops, may we feel that hunger. Taking this bread and wine, may we taste that hunger. In song and prayer, in sharing the peace, in offering ourselves, our gifts, and more, may we know not only our hunger satisfied, but the very hunger of God.

Church may not be the safest place for you at times in this life. Taking space is not always a terrible thing. But the hunger that might draw us away is never stronger than the hunger waiting for you here. That is the hunger drawing us to this table. That is the hunger holding us together, in ourselves and in this body, even when life is hard and death draws near. That is the hunger offering food and his very self to end your own.

AMEN