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Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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*Ninth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 13A – August 2, 2020
Isaiah 55:1-5, Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21, Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21*

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

We meet Jesus and the disciples today as they provide food to a **huge** crowd in the wilderness. But first, let's go back a bit to what occurred before this scene. King Herod of Judea had arrested John the Baptizer because he was preaching against Herod's illegal marriage to Herodias. She had been Herod's sister-in-law until Herod had decided that he wanted her to be his wife.

Herod hosted a grand and elaborate banquet to celebrate his birthday at which Herodias' daughter danced to entertain the guests. Herod was so pleased that he told her she might have anything she asked for as a gift. At her mother's urging, she made the horrendous request of John the Baptizer's head delivered on a platter to the banquet.

Now, despite Herod's hatred of John, he had kept the Baptizer imprisoned. He hadn't wanted to kill him because John was very popular with the people of Judea and Herod didn't want to incite a riot among the populace. But he weighed that possibility against his reputation if he reneged on his offer to Herodias. His desire to save face before his guests won out. So he ordered John killed and his head brought to the banquet on a platter. How repellant!

Soon after his death, John's disciples took his body for burial and they told Jesus about the travesty. Here is where our text picks up – Jesus (with his closest disciples) is going by boat to a deserted place – maybe to mourn; maybe to pray; maybe just to be alone with this devastating information about the execution – the murder – of his cousin, his forerunner in proclaiming repentance. This course of events brings to our minds the hundreds of Black lives that have suddenly been cut down by government actors in our time.

But on the day when Jesus just wanted to be by himself, the people who showed up in the wilderness looking for him pulled him right out of his alone time. Their neediness – whether because of illness, weakness, or deformities – prompted in him not anger or annoyance with being disturbed, but compassion. He *felt with* them, as

com-compassion is defined. The word in Greek conveys an intensity of feeling that “refers to a gut-wrenching, intestinal-twisting, visceral emotion of care. In the Gospels, it is never simply an emotion, it is a deep emotion that moves Jesus or another to saving action.” (Jacobson, Rolf, “The God Who Feels – and Feeds,” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5446>, posted July 26, 2020.)

Now, after Jesus had spent the day ministering to the crowd with the disciples, they came to him and suggested that he send the people away because it was late and, since there was no food in the deserted place, the disciples clearly saw that the people needed to go to nearby villages to find something to eat.

But Jesus still had compassion for the crowd. And he delivered a lesson in discipleship. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat,” he told the disciples. The disciples apparently already had investigated what was available to the crowd of something like 15 to 20,000 poor people (the text says that 5000 were fed, besides women and children) before they made their suggestion to Jesus. And what they had seemed almost nothing in that context: 5 loaves (probably what we would call rolls) and two fish (probably not huge ones, at that).

Jesus’ followers learned that day that discipleship is a partnership. Jesus wasn’t the only one who served people. How those few provisions fed so many people – with a great deal left over – isn’t to be explained by us. What is significant is that the disciples picked up baskets of fish and bread that had been blessed and distributed the food until the people’s needs were satisfied by God – with the biblical “12” baskets of food left over – one in the hands of each of the primary disciples; one for each of the tribes of Judah. This number suggested wholeness or completeness of the feeding.

Given the size of the crowd; how easily they seemed to find Jesus when he left in a boat to be alone; the scarcity of food in those days; the government’s constant difficulty in providing people with sustenance; and the simplicity with which the people were fed, this event must have been terribly threatening to Herod – in fact, to the whole Roman government once word reached them. Can you imagine the effect on people who rarely had enough to eat, of being able to eat their fill, and then leave an abundance of left-overs? Jesus surely would be the leader to whom the people would choose allegiance over the Roman authorities. In fact, imagine what his impact would be today in the midst of the pandemic, when millions in our country have been without work for four and a half months, while Congress has left Washington without enacting a new provision for subsistence income from the government. If he were here today, feeding the masses, the up-coming Presidential election would be a non-issue!

But Jesus had a message beyond those he gave the crowd and his first disciples. It's the one we still receive. In the words of one commentator, Pastor Karoline Lewis, "Jesus is saying to his disciples, 'Live already. You can't sit back and watch me do all this awesome stuff. Live it. Live life. I am counting on you. I need you.'" Pr Lewis also notes that "[d]iscipleship is rarely tidy or convenient. What you will be asked to live – and when – may just be a miracle itself." ("When a Miracle is More than a Miracle," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3293>; posted July 27, 2014.)

In fact, we may need a miracle to be able to recognize when we are called to be disciples as we live in this world of "me first." Today, when someone serves unselfishly, day in and day out, he – or more often, she – is often disparaged as allowing herself to be treated like a doormat. Rarely is she held up as an example.

So how can we address our need to be available to serve faithfully as Jesus' disciples in a world that doesn't welcome followers of Jesus? We know the answer: daily prayer and scripture reading; regular attendance at worship; frequent service of people who are in need; giving to support God's mission; and maintaining friendships with other Christians who will hold us accountable in love to Christ's teachings.

We know the answer. So, do we walk the walk or just talk the talk?

There is ample opportunity in today's world for us to meet people in need as Jesus and his first disciples did. Let's pray for openness to God's call to serve and for the will and energy to carry out that call.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN