

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 19, 2020  
Matthew 14: 13-21 (Text for Pent. 9)  
Pr. Sherman Bishop  
Trinity Lutheran Church, Vermilion

*Caring about Sharing*

I need to begin with a word of explanation for those of you who follow the lectionary cycle as part of your preparation to worship. If you read the lessons for the upcoming Sunday, especially the Gospel, a part of your devotional life then you might be surprised this morning that you did not hear the readings from Matthew 13 which are appointed for this day.

Next Sunday we will celebrate the Affirmation of Baptism for four young people here at Trinity, and I wanted to use those texts, Matthew 13, Romans 8 and the 1 Kings lesson, for that service. So I switched the lectionary readings for today and next week.

Today, instead of hearing some additional parables from Jesus, we now have what can be argued is the most impactful miracle of his earthly ministry — if you do not count the resurrection.

The account of the feeding of the multitude, described as being more than 5,000 people, is the only miracle of Jesus' years of ministry that is recounted in all four of the Gospels. That alone makes it stand out, and there is no shortage of perspectives about what it actually means.

Some preachers and teachers speak of God providing an abundance where we only see scarcity. And this story is about that.

Others see in the act of blessing the bread and fish, of Jesus first giving thanks for what God has given, as an illusion to the Eucharist available to us. And this story is also about that.

Still another interpretive line follows the disciples collecting the remaining food and filling 12 baskets. The symbolism of that number and it's equation with the tribes of Israel makes it hard not to see in those baskets of leftovers the promise of provision enough for the whole people of God. And this story is also about that.

Like so many passages in the Bible, the promises of the revealed word can be mined and while there is ore near the surface, it continues to produce insights the deeper we dig. It does seem that even as this story is about everyone in that crowd receiving enough food on that mountainside, it is also a promise that God will meet your need, meet it in abundance and for the long haul of your life, whatever that need might be.

This morning I don't want to choose between those interpretive strains of what Jesus did in the feeding of the 5,000. Instead I want to remind you of "why" Jesus made his choices that day.

Let me begin that by reminding you of the context of this miracle.

After an extended time of teaching utilizing parables to illuminate the Reign of Heaven which was present in the person of Jesus, he returned to his home town of Nazareth only to face doubt, skepticism and jealousy. While there, word reaches him that his cousin John, son of Elizabeth and Zachariah, who we remember as John the Baptist, has been executed on the

order of King Herod. Weighed down by this sad news he leaves in a boat to find some solitude, presumably for prayer and to grieve in private.

It is hard to sneak away when one's renown has grown as much as has Jesus'. Known as an astonishing teacher, and also a healer, rumored to be a prophet, well such people have much less freedom of movement than even an ordinary celebrity. So crowds of people saw him board the boat and depart, and they followed his progress by keeping tabs on him from the shore.

When he arrived at a place of solitude, the crowd was already there waiting for him, and growing. They came with all the varied expectations of a crowd. Some wanting to hear him. Some needing his touch. Some bringing people about whom they cared to receive the healing said to flow from this righteous prophet.

They came with their own needs, oblivious to his need to be alone, to grieve, to pray.

It is the second verse of today's reading that I want you to think about. Verse 14 states, *"14When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."*

Why did Jesus do what he did? That's the question I posed for you today. Over and over again the writers for the Gospels witness that he acted out of care and compassion. He saw the very real suffering in the lives of those who came to him, and was moved by their trials and tribulations.

You know what that is like, don't you? You see someone obviously living with hurt and want, and your heart is moved. You go to those who have recently lost one they love, and your heart sits heavy when you see their pain. You have the curtain pulled back, as it were, on the poverty in which people have to live, and you gut is wrenched with such an awareness.

There is a question that I sometimes call "The Lutheran Question", or it could be called "The Christian Question", or perhaps simply, "The American Question". It is so often asked when we observe or hear about a profound need in the community or beyond. We ask, "What can we do?"

It is a good question, and I don't want to be misunderstood. I will not disparage it in the least. I will however say that it cannot be the last thing we say on an issue. If we are to live, "following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ" — which is language from the confirmation service we will celebrate next Sunday — then we should pay close attention to what Jesus did in the face of the suffering of the crowds that followed his boat.

*He had compassion for them and cured their sick.*

His compassion always moved him to act. The suffering of the crowd became his priority in that moment. It did not replace his own need for time alone, or for prayer, or to grieve the loss of one important to him. He would find time for such things, but the suffering he saw in the world became his priority. The very word "compassion" means to "suffer with", He could not ignore their need just because he himself was in a difficult situation.

What does that mean for us, now, here at Trinity?

If you are active on social media, perhaps you have seen the meme that says something like, "The church is not closed, we've just moved out of the building."

There is truth in that statement. It is true for Trinity in regards to our worshipping together. This spring it was true for our educational ministries, whether the Sunday School lessons Deb Thompson prepared for our youth, the remaining classes we held to finish out our year of confirmation study, or the Bible Study on the Psalms that we held for the remainder of the spring season.

It was true of the caring for others that has happened through phone calls and cards. Our Stephen Ministry leaders have done us a great service through their coordination of those efforts among our members, especially those most isolated during these days of a pandemic.

For our needs around the building, particularly with the technical challenges we have faced with learning how to use new meeting platforms, to prepare for worship opportunities both on-line and outdoors, and with a long view to what we will need when we are able to move back into the building, we have leaders who have used this time well to make progress on goals to meet those needs.

I believe we owe all of those brothers and sisters a word of thanks for what they have done in this unprecedented time, and that thanks extends to our staff as well. We should not miss the staff who work faithfully "behind the scenes" starting with Sandy in the office, extending to Linda and Chuck in their care for the property, and as I said last week to Sandy and Brian for the music they have made.

I want to acknowledge all of that work, all of that ministry, all of those efforts. But I want to do it in the context of our realities today.

When we suspended worship in our building last March, I thought that would last about about a month, maybe two. We knew we would not be able to resume worship by Easter, and so with our Ecumenical partners in town were actually planning for observing Holy Week and the day of Resurrection in May or June when we could "get back to normal". We badly underestimated both the virility of this virus, and the lack of discipline among some segments of our society in doing what is necessary to interrupt it's life-cycle by preventing it's spread to new hosts.

You know the statistics. The United States leads the world in the number of people infected, in the number of deaths reported, and among other developed nations we are becoming one of the few unable to safely reopen our economy. While we are hopeful that our leaders can find common ground in what is the common good during this crisis, few now doubt that there is not going to be more suffering ahead.

The suffering we experience here in Vermilion and those communities around us will be different than what is experienced in other parts of the country. Hopefully we will continue to do a better job of keeping the spread of COVID19 at a lower level. But however successful or unsuccessful we are, there will be suffering in our community.

How will we be moved to respond?

The way a church moves to make ministry happens is through the leadership and structure of its committee and ministry teams. Our committees have not met since March. Some work of

some committees has continued. I mentioned examples earlier. But during this pandemic forced hiatus, most of our committees have themselves gone dormant.

Knowing now that this crisis will not be short lived, and anticipating that the suffering experienced within our community will grow in intensity, we as the church need to rethink what it means to be the church at this time. What we have done in recent years may not make much sense as a response to what we face today. But a response is called for.

I want to challenge those who have been part of our ministry structure, but I want to especially challenge those who have not been involved with that work, to come together in conversation, prayer and planning to forge a response to the suffering we see among the people who gather here, on the shores of Lake Erie.

As Jesus saw the needs of the crowd, he was moved by compassion to act.  
As we see the needs of our community, let us too be moved by compassion to act.

Like everything else these days, what and how we act will likely be new to us. We will have to explore and experiment with how we minister in this situation. But we need to be clear, when we see the needs of our community, when we are moved by compassion, then to be like Jesus, we must do something.

It is time to “be the church”. Let us do that together.