

August 2, 2020
The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
Lectionary 18, Year A
Matthew 14:13-21
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Two Feasts

Jesus needed some social distance. That's what today's gospel reading tells us, right out of the gate. He needed some time to get away from people, to be by himself. He needed some time to grieve. His friend, his cousin, the man who had baptized him, the man who had prepared the way for him, John the Baptist, had been killed at a birthday party gone terribly wrong.

And Jesus needed some time alone, to process that, to pray, to mourn, to come to terms with the implications of John the Baptist's violent death for his own life, for his own mission and ministry. So, Jesus got on a boat, to get away from the crowds, to get away, even from his own disciples, to get the space, the time, the distance that he needed.

You see, there had been a feast. A celebration for a man who was a ruler, but who was not secure on his throne. A celebration for a man who used his position of power, only to enrich and aggrandize himself. It was a birthday party for a man named Herod Antipas. This feast was certainly by invitation only. Only the wealthiest, only the most influential, only the most politically connected people could be invited to this party. The food that was served is not described in the bible, but we can only imagine the exotic dishes that were served to celebrate the birthday of a man who used his position primarily to enrich himself to the disadvantage of his subjects.

What we do know about this celebration, this birthday party, is that there was entertainment as well as dining. During that entertainment, Herod's wife's daughter danced for him and for his guests. Herod was so pleased with her dancing

that he made an oath to give her whatever she wanted. And so, she asked for what her mother had told her to ask for; the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

The text says that Herod was grieved by this request, but he was not grieved because he had any great love for John the Baptist. In fact, earlier in chapter 14 of Matthew, it says that he wanted to have John the Baptist killed because he was a nuisance who was critical of Herod and his marriage. The only reason that Herod hadn't already had John the Baptist killed was because he was afraid of the political backlash from the people who believed that John was a prophet.

If he grieved, it was because it would cause him political trouble to have John the Baptist killed, not because he had any great regard for him. But he didn't grieve too long when he had to keep the promise that he had made to his wife's daughter, in front of witnesses, to give her the head of John the Baptist. He immediately fulfilled his promise, and the feast of luxurious things, a birthday party, became a feast of death as John the Baptist was killed and beheaded.

John's disciples buried his body and went to tell Jesus what had happened.

And that's why Jesus needed some social distance. Because, in John the Baptist's death, he had come face to face with the sickness that infects the whole world, the sickness of sin. It had manifested itself in selfishness, in greed, in immorality, in deception, in trickery, and in murder. It infects the whole world and the latest outbreak of it had killed one of Jesus' friends.

Of all people, Jesus certainly knew that there was nowhere on earth that he could go to escape from the disease of sin, which causes creation itself to groan, but still, some time alone must have been what Jesus needed, to rest, to reflect, to mourn, to pray.

But he didn't get what he needed. He had gotten on a boat to go away to a quiet and deserted place by himself, but before he had reached his destination, a crowd had gathered where he would have landed.

What could Jesus have done? He could have turned his boat in another direction. He could have told them to go away. He could have insisted that his disciples, who had followed him too, clear the crowds.

But he did not. Instead, he had compassion on them. Compassion means to “suffer with”, which means that he felt their suffering as his own. Rather than focusing on his own needs in that moment, which were great, he had compassion for the crowds who had gathered to meet him, and he healed their sick.

He spent the whole day with this crowd, which numbered 5,000 men and an untold number of women and children and when evening came, he gave them another feast.

All day he had been giving them the feast of his presence, the feast of his power to heal, the feast of his compassion, but when evening came, he gave them another feast, a feast that no one saw coming.

It is doubtful that the crowds who followed Jesus wanted more of him than what he gave them, before the bread and the fish started being passed around. He did for them all that they could have hoped for, all that they could have expected. He did for them what he had done for others. He cured their sick.

Prior to this moment in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus had performed no feeding miracles. The crowds would have had no reason to expect that Jesus, who had healed them would feed them as well. But the disciples brought it up. They wanted Jesus to get rid of the crowds. They didn’t want to get stuck with the job of trying to figure out how to feed all of those people. They knew they couldn’t do it anyway. So, there was only one solution. Get rid of them, send them away, make them fend for themselves.

I don’t think that the disciples’ attempt to get Jesus to send the crowd away means that the disciples were unkind or uncaring. They just knew that providing for the crowd was beyond their abilities and somehow, those who were closest to him, those who knew him best had forgotten to factor in Jesus.

The disciples sound tired in this reading. They might have been a little scared too. John the Baptist was dead. Who could be next? Perhaps, like Jesus, they had been hoping for some time to rest, some time to process John the Baptist's death.

But then Jesus had gotten on a boat, and they had had to follow him. And then they too, found the crowds there, and they too, had had to minister to them. Perhaps they, who had walked with Jesus, who had learned from Jesus, also had compassion on the crowd that had gathered seeking Jesus' care, but then, perhaps they felt that enough was enough.

A full day had gone by and they might have been looking forward to sharing their supper among themselves. But they knew that they could hardly sit down and eat in front of the crowds without being expected to share. And they didn't have enough. When Jesus told them, "They need not go away. You give them something to eat." They told Jesus that they didn't have enough. That's when they told him what they had; five loaves and two fish.

It wasn't much when shared among thirteen. It was nothing when shared among more than 5,000. They couldn't see the point of even trying, but they listened to Jesus. They kissed their hopes for a peaceful dinner goodbye and they gave him their loaves and the fish.

And, Jesus took what little they had, and he made it enough, he made it more than enough, more than enough to feed the crowd and have twelve baskets left over. A feast of plenty that came from little, unexpected abundance in a desert place.

We're living in a time when the needs of the world are great. We are being stalked by a new virus, a new Coronavirus, but we are also dealing with the same viral infection that sent Jesus onto a boat seeking social distance 2000 years ago. And that is the viral infection of sin.

We see it playing out in hundreds of thousands of ways big and small, in world and in our lives today.

We stop and pause and reflect and confess in our liturgy for the ways that it infects us and the ways that we expose others in our lives and in our world to the sin that infects us. We worry and lament and complain about the ways that we see sin present in other people.

Sin is present in the environmental degradation that makes creation groan. Sin is present in the selfishness that causes people to endanger the health of others for their own comfort or entertainment. Sin is present in the greed that causes some people to have so much more than they truly need for their material well-being and even their material comfort while so many others just cling to the edge of survival, waiting for crumbs to fall from the table. Sin is present in the racism that privileges some over others and causes people to hate each other based on their appearance and to close their ears to their experience.

We're living in a time when the needs of the world are great, when our bondage to sin has been made ever more painfully clear and obvious.

We have tried to set ourselves a feast of greed, a feast of power, a feast of wealth, a feast of privilege. We have called it a birthday feast, a celebration of life, but we have found that it is a feast of death, that its taste is ashes in our mouths.

And we find, that though we might wish that we could have social distance from ourselves, from this feast that we have set for ourselves, this feast that is killing us, God is not distanced from us. God in Jesus Christ comes near, and though God might grieve over the wounds we inflict on ourselves and on each other; God has compassion for us. God heals us and God feeds us. God spreads before us a feast of abundance, simple and healing, where all are fed and where our fears of scarcity are conquered.

Because of God's compassion, God feeds us with the feast of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.