

Act of Love in a Violent World

Meditation on Matthew 14:13-21

Aug. 6, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' 16Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' 17They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' 18And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' 19Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

When I first visited Jim, his Shetland sheepdog, Molly, met me at the door to his home--ears pricked up, wagging her tail. She let me pet her thick coat, with colors like Lassie. She loved my 3 children instantly and was patient, even when Josh chased her around and around the kitchen island, teasing her. Jim said Molly wandered all over the house looking for us when we left that night. Molly was Jim's therapy dog, a pup given to him after he had surgery. He walked her several times a day. She loved her walks. She never seemed to get tired.

After Jim and I married, she and Jim moved into my house, and she

slept on the floor by my side of the bed.

She came with me to Princeton Seminary for 2 years, keeping me company and easing my homesickness. She traveled in the back seat for a 2 hour and 15 minute commute one way, every week, including one summer when I took 6 or 8 weeks of intensive Greek. Jim and the boys stayed in York, where Jim was a pastor and Jacob and James attended high school. Molly and I walked together every day for miles-- sometimes an hour in the morning and an hour in the late afternoon. I learned some of her likes: rawhide bones, chicken, hot, baked bread and cottage cheese. I learned her dislikes: loud noises, bicycles, skateboards, basketballs, maintenance men with power tools, and rain. She hated when I left her each day. She slept on my backpack at night--worried I might sneak out without her knowing.

When I accepted a call to ministry in Minnesota, Molly came with us and visited me at the church office, next door to our home. Here is a picture of her and I that appeared in the local newspaper. I was the only "lady pastor" in town. And she may have been the only Shetland sheepdog. I know for sure, she was the most the beautiful dog in town.

She came with us to Florida in 2015. Her thick hair was too heavy for long walks in the heat of the day. A new hairdo helped and the walks grew more frequent. She would get excited and pace the living room while I laced up my walking shoes. That was the only time she minded Melvyn, our cat. Molly would lunge at him, barking, if he approached me while I was getting ready for a walk, as if she were saying, "My mommy! Go away!"

On Friday, I took Molly for a short walk around the outside of the

house before supper. Her legs and hips had grown so weak, she struggled with every step. I gave her a bath when we came in, wrapped her in towels. Jim laid her in her crate to dry off. She immediately fell asleep. After supper, when I went to remove the wet towels, she didn't respond. Jim said that she was gone.

We humans hide our grief, though sorrow and loss is something we all share. We have all lost loved ones, not just our pets, but close family and friends.

Scripture tells us that Jesus experienced loss and grief and all the emotions that we experience. He cried when his friend, Lazarus, died. The community sees and comments, in Luke 11:36, ³⁶ "See how he loved him!"

In today's gospel, we sense his grief for his friend, John the Baptist. The passage immediately follows Jesus' disciples coming to tell him that John is dead, executed by Herod, a corrupt, client ruler of the Roman Empire. Our reading begins at Matthew 14:13, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." For this is a natural reaction to grief. We need our friends' and family's support, and we need our time alone to process our grief and to rest, for grief can be exhausting! We imagine that Jesus has gone to seek God the Father in prayer-- to be comforted and strengthened for the work of ministry and his own suffering ahead.

I imagine Jesus is remembering John and his baptism at the beginning of his public ministry. In Matthew 3:14, Jesus approaches John at the

Jordan, and John protests, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John doesn't care what people think of him; he shuns the luxuries of his day, choosing to live in the wilderness, dining on locusts and wild honey. He boldly calls out to the crowds who have come to be baptized in Luke 3, telling them what they should do if they sincerely repent from this sins--share what they have with the poor. "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

Herod had first imprisoned John for saying Herod should not be sleeping with his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. He would have killed him then, but he worried the people might rise up against him, for they regarded John as a prophet. But then Herod, at his birthday party, promises to give Herodias' daughter, who danced for him, anything she wanted. She asks for the head of John the Baptist, for her mother has coached her. Herod is compelled to do as the girl requests--or lose face.

Afterward, Herod's fear increases. He says to his servants, when he hears about Jesus's deeds of power in 14:2, "This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead."

Jesus isn't off by himself for long. The crowd finds out where he has gone in 14:13-- and follow him on foot. They have no faith that Herod will help them. But they have heard about Jesus, and they have hope.

Jesus sees the crowds in 14:14, and though his heart is breaking because of what happened to John, "he has compassion for them and cured their sick." He responds to the violence in his world--as we should respond to the violence in our world today-- with an act of love. Rather than allowing the disciples to send the crowd off to buy food in the

villages, Jesus says in vs. 16, "You give them something to eat." Notice, he doesn't say, "I will give them something to eat." Then follows the miracle story--the only one that appears in ALL 4 gospels. The disciples reply from a position of scarcity, seeing only the present and not the future, with endless possibilities. We have that same problem. We see what we have--rather, we look around and see what we don't have--and we think the situation cannot change and if it does, it's only going to get worse. Though we profess faith in Jesus Christ, we don't believe God's miraculous provision is for us!

The disciples, thinking they will surely starve, do the same thing. They look at their food supply and see it for less than it is. They call it "nothing!" "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." At the same time, they don't want to give it up, because Jesus has to say to them, "Bring them here to me."

Now don't miss this point! God's provision comes when the disciples are willing to share ALL that they have, in obedience to Christ, believing that God will provide for them and for others through them. His plan for the disciples is the same plan he has for us-- to serve and to give. To be Christ's hands and feet for the world.

On Friday, when Jim told me Molly was gone, I took her out of her crate, wrapped her in a satin sheet and lay down on the floor beside her. I stroked her head, wishing I had taken her for more walks when she was young and never seemed to get tired. I wished I could have just a little more time with her. But then, as Jim says, she had a good home, a good life for 15 years.

The funny thing about love is that it's like the loaves and fish miracle

story in all 4 gospels --the more we give, the more we have to give, and the more we want to give. God's love poured into our hearts never runs out. It's like David says in Psalm 23, "Our cup overflows!"

I find myself wandering around the house, looking for Molly, maybe like when the boys were little and we came to visit her and Jim. When I go in the living room, I expect her to be curled up in front of the door, where she often slept, waiting for another walk.

I don't know what heaven is like for dogs. The Bible doesn't say. But I imagine Molly is loved and cared for by the God who created her, the same God who created and loves us, too. She is running free in endless meadows-- no more suffering, fear or pain. Every day is sunshine; there's no more rain. She has all the rawhide and cottage cheese, and chicken--or something that tastes like it-- to eat. I am certain she will be the most beautiful dog there--or at least she will seem that way to me, if ever again we shall meet.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of this day and every day we have in this world to love and serve you and love and serve our neighbors. Thank you for our family, friends, and our beloved pets, who bring us so much joy and reveal a glimpse of your unconditional love. Help us to be more loving and generous, Lord. Stir us to see what we have not as just a few loaves and fish, as the disciples did, but as a cup that runneth over--blessings that never end from a God whose love never ends. Lead us to give and give and give--and then want to give some more, without worrying that there will be enough for our own

needs and desires, trusting you for all our tomorrows, trusting in our future filled with hope. May we learn to be unselfish, like your Son, who gave Himself up for the world--so that we might be forgiven for all our sins and have abundant and everlasting life with Him. In Christ we pray. Amen.