

Pentecost 9A – August 2, 2020

Trinity Lutheran Church, Fairview Village

Text: Matthew 14: 13-21 (reference Matthew 14: 1-12)

Pastor Stacey-Kyle Rea

In the name of the Father, and + the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+++

Matthew's listeners knew what drove Jesus out on a boat to a deserted place.

John the Baptist was family to Jesus.

We begin today's Gospel with two banquets laid side by side. The first was the banquet to celebrate the birthday of Herod. John had been imprisoned, and Herod knew how popular John had become. Some thought he was a prophet.

Meanwhile, Herod grants his daughter anything she wishes for dancing so beautifully for him. And she chooses to please her mother by granting her wish – the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

It is an awful moment, a power play gone wrong. Herod chooses to save face instead of doing the right thing.

This is where today's story begins, "Now when Jesus heard this..."

Jesus and the disciples lost a dear one for the sake of a king's image. A terrible show of power and ego.

We are meant to compare this deadly feast and today's feast of 5000. We are meant to see the difference. It is such a powerful miracle, it is the only one that makes all 4 Gospel accounts.

Jesus retreats. Every time we hear about Jesus retreating, he's "borrowing" someone else's boat and going as far from the beach as he can. But today, the people follow. The crowd brings Jesus to a place of compassion, not destruction.

He goes ashore, and in one moment, reaches out to the ancient crowds and to you and me in our deepest pain. Even in his deep loss of his friend, John the Baptist.

Jesus offers an alternative look at what the feast means. In the times before money was exchanged, the feast symbolized the greatest extravagance. Wealth and prosperity. The feast of Herod is one that leads to self-preservation. The feast of Jesus not only feeds the 5000, men plus the women and children...but there are leftovers.

The disciples couldn't see this. They were clouded in their own grief and self-preservation. They asked Jesus to send the crowds away, for they needed to find their own food. Jesus turned the desert of despair into abundance, turned a feast of beheading into a feast of equipping. "You feed them. You give them something to eat."

The miracle happened as Jesus equipped the disciples to care for those in need. Each disciple received a basket for distribution and collection of scraps. There were leftovers.

This is the miracle of God's love. Something the people of ancient times needed to hear, so much that they followed Jesus on foot as he traveled to get away. Hope and inspiration in a world that beheads for the sake of self.

We learn about God's amazing, unbounded love for us in today's Gospel. It is a love that surprises our ancient brothers and sisters. It is so unlike the "love with strings attached" of every human governing body they knew. The power games. The distinction between master and servant, and the ultimate reality that in this wealth construct, you would never leave your station in life.

And God hands each one of us a miracle in the form of a basket, and equips us to share a love that abundantly multiplies. Sometimes, that is in the form of bread and wine. Sometimes, that is in the form of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich made for a neighbor in need. Sometimes, our basket includes a word of kindness, shared in a written letter to another person.

I know that COVID-19 and all the precautions we take have a way of making us feel alone. Separate. Lonely. Maybe even scared. The disciples were scared, too. And as they attempted to separate from others, Jesus called them into duty.

There is a miracle happening in this time of COVID-19. But if we get stuck on the way we want things to be, we may miss Jesus' invitation to see it. The Lord is already gathering us together. Here, online in worship. Sundays as we gather food, personal care items and gift cards for food pantries. And peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for feeding programs.

We are handed a basket of plenty as we gather online to pray on Wednesday nights and to learn on Sunday mornings. We are offered a basket of plenty from Jesus when we take a moment to write a note or call and check in on someone.

Maybe in this time of COVID-19, loaves and fishes and bread and wine are being offered to us in ways we don't yet recognize.

Because the true miracle is already happening. Do you see it?

Jesus Christ loves you and me beyond our basic wants and needs, and loves us into extravagance. So much extravagance that there are leftovers!

God's gonna give you a basket, friends. God is giving us all baskets. Even in this time of COVID-19, God is equipping you and me to make a difference in a grieving, hungry, desperate world. Jesus doesn't do this work by himself, even though he could. He invites disciples to do the feeding.

Following Jesus means making our faith visible in our acts of love. In our voices fighting for justice. In the compassion we lend to others. We meet Jesus every time we take on the basket and let God make a miracle happen through our hands and hearts.

And God will do this. The feast of the 5000 reminds us that God can work miracles in places where scarcity threatens. We will always fear that the task is impossible, and it is if the work is only left to us. If it's left up to us, we would wallow away in our sadness that we can't gather like we wish. If it's up to us, our feasts would end in beheading and self-preservation and fear.

We can have faith that the miracle is already happening, and it's safely in God's hands. When we unite in the name of God, in body or in spirit, we watch baskets overflow with extras. God gives us the power to do good in our world. Nourishes us with sacramental love. We are called to accept the basket and follow.

This is not always a journey that leads us to our own dreams of happiness or prosperity. It's not even a journey that asks us what are greatest wish would be. In fact, using our basket to reveal God's abundance can be filled with pain, struggle. We just need to see Jesus on the cross to know that.

But Jesus's story doesn't end in death on a cross. And neither does ours. When we pick up the basket, we are allowing God's love to shine for a world that desperately needs a word of grace and mercy. When we pick up the basket, we are equipped with everything we need to share hope with those in need.

God intends for us to know the good life of plenty, not scarcity. God does not abandon us, but remains with us and empowers us so that together, we may witness and celebrate the miracle.

Just as the ancient people saw long ago, the miracle of God's love continues to break through, turning us from our self-made prisons, and freeing us to be God's hands in the middle of a miracle. No matter what boat we try to take to get away from the troubles of this world, God is always calling us back to shore. Calling us to cast aside our nets of fear and embrace the dreams that God sees for us. Baskets of plenty for all. With leftovers.

Jesus says, "They need not go away. You give them something to eat." And all ate. And all were filled. Amen.