The Trust Test

Matthew 14:13-21

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 14:13-21

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This summer, we are focusing on our relationship with Jesus and stories of Jesus—Summer with Jesus. Our goal is that we grow to know more about Jesus and to grow to know Jesus, to love Jesus and to trust Jesus. Jesus surely knows and loves you! This morning, we look at one of the most famous stories about Jesus—the feeding of the five thousand—an experience in the lives of the people who followed Jesus that was so dramatic that it is the only miracle of Jesus’ reported in all four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

This morning, we will simply walk through the story with some commentary along the way. *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.* The story starts with Jesus in a low place. John the Baptist was a cousin of Jesus, a preacher, a prophet who had the godly gumption to call people to repent and to name out loud the misbehavior of those in power, and King Herod kills him for it. Jesus needs to get away to grieve. He has the power of God within him yet knows that a wounded heart needs its own time and its own space.

*But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd.* It’s a huge crowd. It is described as 5000 men, not counting women and children and we know women and children count. If you do the math, you realize there easily could have been 20,000 people on the hillside. *He saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.* This is actually quite remarkable. Not that Jesus healed, but when. We know Jesus is grieving. We also know from the other gospels that his disciples had just returned from their first mission trip with great excitement and needed to debrief with Jesus. There were so many people coming for help that Jesus and his disciples didn’t even have time to eat. So Jesus had gone to a deserted place to grieve and to debrief with his disciples and this gigantic crowd inconveniently shows up. If it was you or me we’d be thinking, “Go home people. Get a life and leave us alone!”

Years ago, I remember hearing about three kinds of love: love *if you*, love *because of* and love *in spite of.* Love *if you*—I love you *if you* take out the garbage, *if you* empty the dishwasher. I love you *if you* continue to meet my needs. It’s conditional love—conditioned on you pleasing me. Then there is I love you *because of*—I love you *because* you are good
looking, because you are tall or short, because you are funny, because you are nice to me. This is also a conditional love which works until or unless whatever it is I love about you is lost or goes away. A man once received a text from his former fiancé, “Hey Jimmy—no words can express the unhappiness I’ve felt since I broke our engagement. No one can ever take your place in my heart. Please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! Yours forever, Marie. P.S. And congratulations on winning the State Lottery!” That’s love because of! Love if you and love because of are conditional lives.

And, finally, there’s love in spite of, the unconditional love. I love you in spite of the fact that you let me down. I love you in spite of the fact that you annoy me, in spite of the fact it takes some effort on my part to love you. So this huge inconvenient crowd shows up and Jesus has compassion on them. He has love in spite of—in spite of his need to grieve, in spite of his need for personal time with his disciples. He has “people eyes” and sees people the way they really are, worn down and thrown down—and you have the people eyes of Jesus when you see people they way Jesus sees them and loves them in spite of. So the day passes with Jesus teaching the crowd and healing their sick

When 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. Translation: Hey, Jesus, they’re tired, they’re hungry, we’re tired, we’re hungry. Get rid of them, Jesus. Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” This stuns the disciples. Imagine you and eleven friends trying to feed 20,000 people! It never occurs to the disciples to ask Jesus for help. Jesus, whom they have seen heal a paralyzed man, raise a girl back to life, give sight to a blind man and hearing to a deaf one, but they aren’t connecting the dots. They don’t compute that Jesus could feed the crowd. In John’s Gospel, we learn that Jesus says to Philip, Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? Jesus said this to test Philip (John 6:5-6). So Jesus gives them the Trust Test. Do you trust me? In whom are you trusting to deal with a difficult situation? Philip and the other disciples are utterly clueless. It’s a fail. They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. Seven items. They overestimate their problem because they underestimate who is with them.
As Dale Bruner says, “The disciples think they have ‘nothing here’ except these seven items. But they are counting only the realities that impress them, not the Reality that should impress them the most. Disciples should always count to eight.”² Have you been in a situation, or are you in a situation right now where whatever your seven are, your seven won’t do it? Lord, I have nothing but five loaves and two fish. I have nothing but my energy, effort, grit, gumption, mind, resources and team and it’s—just—not-working. I have counted to seven but you my Lord invite me to count to eight. I can’t find a job. I can’t beat this illness. I can’t heal this relationship. When you face a challenging situation for which no resolution is apparent, what goes through your mind and emotion? The Trust Test asks, “Are you stopping at seven or counting to eight?”

Last week, I learned that a graduate school classmate of mine has been diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease. I hate ALS. And to be clear, I hate brain tumors and pancreatic cancer and ovarian cancer and I could on and on, situations where medical science of today can only count to seven. If I lived in Greece as it faces economic collapse, I’d be afraid that my “seven,” what funds I have, would not be enough. Jesus invites us to count to eight. Does he heal people today and resolve other tough situations? Oh, yes. Does God resolve every difficult situation in the way we want it resolved? Obviously not and for reasons only God knows. What we do know is that our Lord will either rescue us out of or through—out of the valley of the shadow of death or accompany us through it—and either way we know the reality of his presence and love. Count to eight means trust Jesus to be involved in your life and to never leave you, to always be with you.

² Frederick Dale Bruner, The Churchbook Matthew 13-28, p. 68.

I love the cartoon in which Jesus says to the little boy holding the five loaves and two fish, “Do you want to supersize that?” And he said, “Bring them [the five fish and two loaves] here to me. It reminds me of his invitation given at another time, Come to me all who are weak and heavy-laden (Matthew 11:28). Bring what you have to me. Come to me. Jesus works with what we bring to him, beginning with our own selves. In whatever situation you are in, be alert to the equivalent of the five loaves and two fish our Lord has given you, offer them to Jesus, count to eight and trust him. As Jehoshaphat with a small community prayed when he was facing a huge army, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you” (2 Chronicles 20:12b). He counted to eight. He passed the trust test!
Allan Emery is a follower of Jesus who experienced what it means to count to eight, to trust Jesus. He was serving in the Coast Guard one unusually bitter winter. Allan said, [one evening] “I was ‘Officer-in-Charge’ of an eight-foot converted yacht. All but one seaman and I were on liberty on shore. I made a final inspection of our mooring lines and went to bed. I had my devotions, thanking the Lord that I was in harbor as the seas were twenty-foot waves with gale force winds.

“I was about to drop off when I heard voice, ‘Skipper? Captain of the Port wants you on the phone.’ The Captain said, ‘Emery, we have a Navy pilot who has gone down and you’ve got to go out.’ I reminded Captain Scott that I had just returned from a two-day patrol and that my people were on liberty. He replied that I could round them up in the taverns. I felt I should tell him that in 19-degree cold and gale winds no pilot could live but a few minutes. Through the roar of the wind outside the sentry-box I could clearly hear the officer shouting through the phone, ‘Emery, when the Coast Guard took over the U.S. Lifesaving Service they also accepted its motto, although only ‘Semper Paratus’ [Always Ready] is used today. The motto of the Lifesaving Service was, ‘You have to go out, but you don’t have to come back.’ All I could say is, ‘Aye, aye, sir.’

“Under the full force of the gale we went to spot where the plane went down. There were no signs of wreckage. We patrolled slowly to save the ship from unnecessary battering. Suddenly, a light shone bright and clear. I checked my chart but saw no beacon, lighthouse, or flashing buoy in any location near this light. It was flashing three short, three long, and three short white flashes. We suddenly realized it was an S.O.S. We sent back the message, ‘Stand by, we are coming.’ We changed course and headed straight for the light. There was a small Navy craft, larger than we, its bow hard aground on a reef. We could well go aground ourselves. But the grounded vessel could not last long, and no small boat could get to the grounded ship and take off the crew.

“We got a line to the other ship and I gave full power to haul the other vessel. Nothing happened. With my stern fixed by cable to the other ship, my bow was now acting as a sail, my ship began to rotate until I felt the keel of my ship jam on the reef as well. Now all that was left was for us, too, to break up. No help could come in time. We’d had to go out, but we did not have to come back. [In the language of today, all Emery had was five
loaves and two fish and counting to seven wasn’t enough.] Emery went on, ‘I remember quietly telling the Lord that it was all right, but if he wanted anything more in the life of one Allan Emery and the men in these ships he’d have to move quickly.’ Emery counted to eight! He said, ‘As I was gazing to the northwest, suddenly the distant darkness that was land disappeared. I realized that a great sea like a tidal wave was charging down upon us with the speed of an express train. By reflex, I gave the engines maximum power. And the sea lifted us like a cork and we were free. Then, to our amazement, the same sea lifted the grounded vessel as in that moment the pull from our line hauled her loose. We towed her stern-to into deep water and we proceeded back to base.

“I determined that with God’s help I’d remember Captain Scott’s words to me and apply them to my Christian life of service and of love. ‘You have to go out, but you don’t have to come back.’ As a note of interest, the Navy pilot Emery had been sent to rescue had his position wrong. He ditched his plane just off Revere Beach, Massachusetts, and actually was able to walk ashore.”

The Trust Test. Count to Eight! Trust Jesus! Jesus is asking you, “Are you willing to count to eight? To trust in me as Lord and God? Will you trust your children to me? Your money to me? Your health to me? Your work to me? Your life to me? Will you trust me when you have to go out but do not have to come back? Trust me to rescue you out of or through—out of the valley of the shadow or accompany you through it? Trust me to see you through what you are going through. Count to eight. Trust me.”

Then 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 We see in this the foreshadowing of communion as Jesus prayed, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples to serve others, very much as we do today. We also learn from Jesus to give thanks before a meal. Consider whatever difficult or uncertain situation you are facing today and offer your equivalent of five loaves and two fish to Jesus as you count to eight and trust Jesus. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. Amen

3 Allan C. Emery, A Turtle on a Fencepost, (Word Books, 1979, Waco), pp. 65-68