

Sunday: Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: August 2, 2020

Text: Matthew 14:13-21

Title: The Compassion of God

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

Today we begin a series of readings from Matthew chapter 14, that consist of miracles performed by Jesus. Our Gospel reading this morning draws us to the shores of the sea of Galilee where Jesus will feed 5,000+ people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Next week we will encounter Jesus as he calms a storm. And in two weeks we will find Jesus healing the daughter of a Canaanite woman. As we hear Matthew recount these miracles in his Gospel, we are amazed by the power of Jesus to act in ways that defy all scientific reason and logic. The miracles remind us that Jesus is true God, in human flesh. The question arises, “What are we to learn from the miracles of Jesus?”

Paul in his letter to young pastor Timothy reminds him, and educates us that

¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (1 Timothy 3:16-17).

As the appointed reading for today, what might we take away from Jesus’ miracle of feeding the 5,000? Is this miracle to demonstrate that Jesus is able to meet the physical needs of the community? Are we to walk away from this text with the idea that Jesus cares for all the people he encounters, believer and unbeliever, alike? Or is it that Jesus is showing the disciples that they still have much to learn about him and the ministry they will be called to continue after his death, resurrection, and ascension?

Rev. Francis Rossow, one of my professors at the Seminary, has explored the miracles of Jesus and posits that there are three ways to use a miracle text to proclaim the Gospel. As Paul puts it, that would be “for teaching,” “training in righteousness” and “equip[ing] for every good work” (1 Timothy 3:16-17).

First, he says the miracles have an “evidential function.” That is, they show us what Jesus can do as God.

Second, is a “typological function.” That is, they give us a glimpse of what God has done for us in Christ; and

Third, miracles have a “didactic function.” That is, they teach us about ourselves, the fallen nature of creation, and God’s manner of operating in the world.

Looking at miracle texts in this way can see meaning in miracles that might escape us otherwise.

In the feeding of the 5,000 Jesus reveals to us something of the nature of God, and what he has, does, and will do for mankind. Today, we encounter the grace of God, through Jesus, as he cares for the crowds who flock to him as he tries to “get away” and process the death of his cousin, John the Baptist.

To set the scene for this miracle, we need to back up a few verses to pick up the context for the events of the day. Beginning with Matthew 14:1 the inspired Apostle Matthew lays out the events leading up to the journey across the Sea of Galilee that day.

“At that time, Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.”” (14:1-2). You know the story. John was arrested for challenging Herod’s marriage to his brother Phillip’s wife. There was a birthday party, and Herodias, Phillip’s and now Herod’s wife, convinced her daughter to ask for the head of John in reward for a dance that pleased Herod and the crowd. And Herod obliged her request. After these events John’s disciples took the body of John away and buried him. The disciples of John then came to tell Jesus what had happened.

Our Gospel reading today picks up after Jesus was told of the death of John. Matthew writes, “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.” Well he tried to get away, but the crowds saw him set out across the lake and raced around the shore to meet Jesus on the other side when he landed.

Jesus efforts to be by himself were derailed by the crowds he encountered. As he left the boat, he surveyed the people in front of him and he was overwhelmed

with “compassion” we are told. Jesus then spent the rest of the day healing them of their sicknesses. Jesus, setting aside his own feelings of sadness and despair at the death of his cousin, and pours himself into meeting the needs of the crowds. Jesus, upon seeing the needs of the people, brings his divine nature to bear on the physical and spiritual needs of the people. In the miraculous healing he brought to these “lost sheep of Israel” we see the mission of Jesus as one that brings restoration to the world. Vanquishing diseases and healing people gave them, and us, a taste of the kingdom of heaven that is present with Jesus. We, also, see the extent to which Jesus sets aside his personal feelings and needs for the benefit of the other. In his actions, we see Jesus living and perfectly fulfilling the law of God, as laid out in the Torah and in the Ten Commandments. Jesus is putting the will of God, his assigned mission as the incarnate Son of God, ahead of his wants and desires. He is also showing the extent to which loving the neighbor involves denying self.

What a picture of obedience to God this presents. If that is all we are to get from this parable, wouldn't that be enough? Here is Jesus showing us the life of the believer and the true reflection of living in God's Will.

That would be enough **IF** the scriptures were all about how we are to live in this world. Yes, they give us guidance in living as sons and daughters of God, but the real message of Scripture is Jesus. John tells us that as he nears the conclusion of his Gospel,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31).

There is more to this miracle account than a moral message of do good and feed the masses. This miracle reveals something about Jesus as the Son of God and about God himself.

There is a ten-letter word found in our reading today that reveals an attribute of God that has been demonstrated through the ages. Matthew writes, “When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had **compassion** on them and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14).

“Compassion,” is defined in the Meriam-Webster Dictionary as a “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it”. This

definition does not do the text justice though. Here compassion sounds like an intellectual exercise. Jesus response to the crowd before him went far beyond a mental determination that they were in distress. Compassion in this vein is when we say, “there is famine in Africa, we should send money.” Sure, we acknowledge there is distress in another’s life, and, of course, we desire to alleviate it. This definition does not carry with it the physical need to respond that Jesus demonstrates. What we encounter with Jesus is much deeper.

In the Greek, the word translated as compassion or pity in some places, is not an intellectual exercise. The word brings with it connotations of the stirring of one’s innermost parts. This is the gut-wrenching, stomach turning feeling that affects and overwhelms the person. This is the feeling God, in Jesus, experiences as he sets foot on shore. He sees the crowds and he is overwhelmed by the condition they are in. Physically, they are broken, and spiritually, they are dying. The plague of sin has infected them all. It is a pandemic that causes disruption, death, and destruction in its progression through the world.

The presence of evil in what was initially created and deemed very good, is gut-wrenching to Jesus. The corruption in the world brought on by sin has a tangible, visceral effect on our Lord. In this we learn something about Jesus. The incarnate Son of God, who lived and experienced all of life’s difficulties, demonstrates in his actions the true compassion of God. This is the compassion, the love, the desire for restoration found in Genesis 3 when God promised the Messiah to our first parents who turned their back on God in a quest to be their own gods.

Through the Old Testament, even when his creation, turned against him, Yahweh did not break his promise. God felt compassion, had compassion on the people of this world. When the Israelites turned their back on God, He drew them back through his wise correction, forgiveness, and restoration. In Moses, God showed the Israelites what was expected of them as God’s chosen people. In the prophets, he repeated his promises of the messiah and called people from their wandering away from the Torah back to his family. Through it all God felt and showed compassion.

From the complaining in the wilderness to the apostasy of the kings of Israel leading up to the Babylonian Captivity, God endured the stench of corruption of his Word and his will. The sins of the people were a blight on the land and gave God every reason to reject all mankind, but our God is a God of compassion.

In reality, we are no better than the Israelites who rejected God. We are sinful people. We are selfish, putting ourselves above God and his Word. We lose sight of what compliance with the Commands of God looks like. Jesus explains when questioned,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Despite our wretched failure to be obedient to God, He looks upon us and feels compassion. It is this compassion that led him to send his son, into the world to seek and to save the lost. This deep-down feeling of compassion that stirs the innermost parts of God, led Jesus to be obedient to His Father and follow the road to the cross. Jesus taking the repulsive sins of all mankind. The sins of you and me. The acts of self-righteousness and idolatry that reject God, are atoned for by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Compassion is the hallmark of God. Paul paints the picture of this compassion in Ephesians 2:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God

The compassion Jesus had on the people in our Gospel text today, is a manifestation of who God is. By grace God heals our sick and broken bodies. Through his mercy he feeds us and cares for us physically. Out of his

unfathomable love he calls us out of darkness into His marvelous light, washing us in the waters of regeneration, adopting us as children and making us heirs of His kingdom.

God's compassion is here for you today. In the forgiveness of sins given in our Confession and God's Absolution. It is present in the Word proclaimed, in the reading of Scripture and the message preached. It is present in the gift of Christ's true body and blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Jesus looks out upon the world and is moved to have compassion on the lost sheep he sees. He is moved to heal our illnesses and to feed us with the bread he blesses and gives us. The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 shows us today that powerful compassionate nature of Jesus, the Son of God, who took on human flesh so we might be reconciled to God our Father. Christ for you, Christ for me, Christ's compassion poured out on us.

May the compassion of our Savior continue to wash over us all, healing us, feeding us, and sustaining us in faith to life everlasting. Amen