

The Rev. Kristin P. R. Wickersham  
The Miracle of The Multiplication  
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church  
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost, Ordinary Time, Year A.  
2 August 2020

**Matthew 14:13-21**

*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

These are some normal human reactions to traumatic events: lack of energy, headaches, disbelief, denial, anxiety, fear, sadness, helplessness. There's also anger, withdrawal, outbursts, insomnia, avoidance, crying. There are different kinds of trauma including acute, chronic, and complex. Early childhood trauma includes events such as natural disasters, community violence, traumatic grief, and loss. Someone sent me a funny cartoon this week, and it was really about traumatic response, even though it didn't look like it. Two cats were standing on their hind legs talking. The first was holding a cell phone and looking at it with bulging eyes. The second cat looked normal. The first cat was about twice the size of a normal cat, her fur was all zigzags and her tail was sticking straight out. The second cat, with a worried expression, said to the first one, "Stop looking at the news! You're getting all puffy!!" I know what that cat feels like. We've had a lot over the past few months. We've had large community concerns, like our health, racism, and the state of the world. And then there are the everyday personal things, like whether our children can go back into a classroom without harm to themselves, their beloved teacher, or the asthmatic lunch room lady. We've been through a lot, and it looks to be continuing for a while.

Jesus has been through a lot, too. Between last week's parables and today's reading, two traumatic things have happened. Jesus returned to his hometown to teach in the synagogue. His own people took offense at him, and argued against him. At around the same time, Herod arrested John the Baptist and threw him in prison. Herodias' daughter was granted whatever she wanted because she had danced beautifully for King Herod and some distinguished guests. She asked for John's head on a platter and Herod gave it to her. Jesus has just heard the news. His cousin, his mentor, the man who baptized him, had been murdered. This acute trauma took place in the context of decades of chronic trauma from Roman occupation. Pompey conquered Israel in 63 BCE. The Romans were brutal and their Jewish lackeys, like Herod, weren't any better. A century of occupation, chronic violence, being denied by the people in his own hometown, and John's death all weighed on Jesus' mind as our story opens. Matthew tells us repeatedly that in times like this Jesus goes alone somewhere to pray. On this day, he heads out to a deserted place in a boat

Prayer can help us deal with trauma. It can remind us of our connection to God and creation. Prayer reminds Jesus who he is and guides him in his mission in the world. Jesus went into the wilderness before he began his ministry. Remember that? Off in the wilds, being tempted by the

devil. “Turn these stones into bread!” “How about some worldly power?” “Go jump off a cliff!” The wilderness is where the Jews wandered for forty years after God freed them from slavery. When they denied God and forgot who they were, God rained down manna from heaven upon them, to sustain them through their difficulties. Miriam found the rock, Moses split it open, and water poured forth in the desert. Manna from heaven and water. God gives life in the wildernesses of our lives.

Jesus, after renewing himself by going off to a wilderness place alone, comes back to show us how to respond to trauma. As he comes back, he sees the crowds. Frankly, I think I might have just turned around. But Jesus doesn’t hunker down in a safe place away from the world’s problems. Crowds have gathered who’ve heard about the death of John the Baptist and who have heard about Jesus. Jesus sees them and has compassion upon them. He doesn’t leave, he dives right in. He spends the day healing the sick and as night falls his disciples come to him and say, “Enough! The day is over. There are way too many people here and they don’t have food to eat. We’re far away from anywhere. Send them home so that they can have a meal.”

Jesus’ response shows us what God is like. Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, shows us what prayer and connection to Our Father really means in this world. Jesus shows us that loving God doesn’t just mean prayer and some kind of spiritual connection. Jesus often quotes Hosea 6:6. It seems to be one of his favorites scriptures, “God desires mercy, not sacrifice. God desires the acknowledgment of God, not burnt offerings.” It means turning your entire life over to God and acknowledging that everything we have comes from God. This story of the feeding of the 5,000 isn’t just a story of feeding the hungry, it’s a story about prayer. Jesus has already taught his disciples how to pray. He’s already taught them the Lord’s prayer. Now he shows it to them. That prayer isn’t simply a mantra we say over and over again with hope in our hearts. It is a prayer that we are to pray in our lives, with what we do.

Jesus says to give away what you have. He told the disciples to feed the people their own food. And the disciples do. This is what it means to be a follower of Christ. The disciples didn’t keep what they had, the “nothing” they saw, the meager portions that they thought wouldn’t be enough even for themselves after a long day in the wilderness. They turn it over to Jesus. They put what they had in the hands of God.

Jesus takes their offering and looks to heaven. He acknowledges God. He blesses it. Now this isn’t so much a blessing of the bread to make it into a magical something as it is a blessing of God, Godself. “All things come from you, O Lord, and from your own have we given you.”\* Here we are in the wilderness, traumatized by what’s happening in our lives, tempted by our desire for worldly power, revenge against Rome and Herod. Tempted to something other than mercy. Save us from temptation. Deliver us from the Evil one, the Tempter who descends upon us the wildernesses of our lives. Forgive us for all of our sins -- for denying you. Forgive us for believing that we deserve what we have. Forgive us for feeling scarcity instead seeing your abundance and love for the whole world. Forgive us for believing that what we have is ours and not yours.

And then Jesus broke it all apart and told his followers to give it away. They didn’t seek out the deserving poor, or those who had true need. They gave it to everyone. This is the praying and action of The Lord’s Prayer in the world. This is the Christian response to tragedy and need. Not to focus on our own hurts and traumas. Not to hole up somewhere we can connect to God. What we have

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\* 1 Chronicles 29:14

bleses us only when we acknowledge it as God's and give it to others. It becomes not just barely enough, but so much that all can be *filled*. It will bless us by becoming, in God's hands, more than what it used to be. God's abundance will be made clear. Manna will rain down from heaven. Water will flow from rocks. That is the miracle of the multiplication. That is the abundance of God, and God's care for us. Never ending. Never failing. Always faithful. Always loving. Always more than enough, more than we could ever imagine. Let us pray.

Amen.