

“God Will Find a Way”
9th Sunday after Pentecost – August 2, 2020 – MT 14:13-21/A

This morning I’d like to “hold” the reading of the Gospel for a moment, to share with you a personal experience I had this week: I am certain that I am not alone in the state of my mental health these days. I’ve been feeling particularly low, as we move into our 5th month of stay at home practices. I’m tied to Facebook, broadcasting to listeners I cannot see, staring at my own face on the computer after pushing the button that says, “GO LIVE.”

As we are all isolating and isolated at different levels, there is the ever present and overwhelming crush of 150,000 brothers and sisters dead from Coronavirus in America alone, protests and power struggles catching fire in city after city, frustration and anger as our attitudes and opinions and lifestyles divide us and galvanize our separation. All this, as our beloved country twists and turns, contracting and expanding like a pair of lungs gasping for breath. Some days seem almost usual, but others fall on me harder and harder until I wonder if anyone feels anything and anyone has the energy to care right now about global poverty, injustice, political upheaval, earthquakes, hurricanes and millions in peril of starving to death. It is a lot to care about. It is almost inconceivable that anything we can do can make any difference at all.

But then, in the middle of a rainy afternoon, an email arrived with some random questions for this pastor. Nothing too complex, just questions to answer. But at the end of the email...a gift -- words of thanksgiving for a particular reflection I had offered that had come as a “godsend” to a particular life in a personal struggle. My words had, somehow, begun the process of some small healing, some blessed relief from some old pain. Hearing that was food for my soul, that was hungrier than I would have said.

Today we hear for the umpteenth time the story of the Feeding of the 5,000. The event itself is included in all four of the Gospels, which means that it was an important story for the early Christians to share, and sort of telegraphs that, “*This is Important! Pay Attention!*” Now, so that we give this miracle it’s proper place in our faith journeys, let’s take a moment to put the precious stone of this story into its proper setting.

Just before today’s reading, Jesus has finished a block of teaching on the Kingdom of God. “*The Kingdom of heaven is like...*” the abundant shower of seeds, sown on all the ground, fertile or not; the astounding caution to not divide weed and wheat until it is time, so that neither is damaged by inexperienced reapers; and a handful of illustrations of tiny seeds becoming huge trees, a smidgen of yeast leavening an entire bowl, a treasure in a field, a pearl of great price, and a fishnet cast into the sea for a haul of fishes, both tasty ones and some good for nothing but bait.

Then Jesus ends up in his hometown of Nazareth, and he faces a rather tepid reception from his old neighborhood. Meanwhile, Herod Antipas has imprisoned John the Baptist in Jerusalem, and even though he fears the crowd, Herod’s birthday party ends with John literally losing his head as part of the entertainment. John’s disciples come boldly, take his body and bury it, and bring the awful news to Jesus. Now, we hear the Gospel according to Matthew, in the 14th chapter, as Jesus is taking in the news of the horrible death of his kinsman, mentor and disciple:

13Now when Jesus heard [about the beheading of John the Baptist], 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. There is a lot going on in this passage, especially when you look at it not as a story from a long, long time ago – but as an illustration of what God can do in a world that is broken and beaten down. Just notice that everyone in the story needs something, even our dear friend **Jesus**, who is feeling a deep loss, and is trying to get away by himself to grieve. **The crowds** are anxious and can't wait for healing – for themselves or their loved ones - so they follow after him along the seashore, so that by the time Jesus got to shore, he had to put his needs aside; out of compassion for these beloved ones, and he cured their sicknesses and infirmities.

Then it got late, and the crowds needed food, but the **disciples** were not prepared to feed them all. They had hardly anything to share. They needed food, they needed baskets, they needed a plan! So, Jesus collected what they had – he blessed the meager meal – and broke it up in pieces to give to the 12, to distribute to thousands of hungry lives. (What was he thinking? Was he teaching them about communion? Was he expecting manna from heaven? Did he really think the *disciples* were ready to take on the needs of so many?)

But then, miraculously, there was enough! All of them – the whole crowd - ate and were filled. Jesus, the crowd, and the disciples, who perhaps were beginning to understand, as they picked up **12 baskets of broken pieces of bread**, that they would be the 12 baskets into which God would fling the seeds of the ways that they would distribute comfort, cure, bread, and blessing.

You know, God knows the needs of the world. God is, even now, finding a way to respond to all the needs of all his children who live and suffer and seek God's love and mercy. And whether we are ready for what is happening now – what we see day to day or what we imagine is coming in the future – God has been preparing us for it our whole lives. There is probably not a return to normal in our near future; there is not even a clear vision for a "new normal." But God is finding a way.

I recently came across an amazing piece by Pastor Steven Charleston, a Native American elder, author, and retired Episcopal bishop of Alaska. I posted it on our Seasonal Bible Study page, so it may be familiar to some of you. Hear this, my brothers and sisters:

Something sacred is coming this way. That is how my ancestors would have said it.

In the midst of all this turmoil and confusion,
 when we cannot clearly see the path before us,
 when we feel trapped in a situation we cannot control, then I believe
 the wise elders of my holy heritage would climb to the high place of the heart,
 draw the circle of reason and faith around them,
 and stand to sing their prayers into the open sky of the history to come.
 They would not shrink into a corner afraid, but rise up to catch the first light
 of what was coming into being all around them.

We are living in a time of emergence. We are the witnesses to a great renewal.

The world is full of the fear of birth and change,
 but that transformation will one day be our blessing.

Do not be afraid, but be believing.

Come to the place where the ancestors are already standing.
 Come and see. Something sacred is coming this way. **Amen.**