

HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew 14:13-21 NRSV, emended

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the thirteenth chapter.

C: Glory to you, O Lord.

[The disciples of John the Baptizer went to Jesus and told him of their master's murder.] When Jesus heard this, he withdrew from his hometown in a boat and went to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds heard of it, they followed him on foot from their towns. ¹⁴When Jesus 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." ¹⁸Jesus 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, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves. He gave them to the disciples, who gave them to the crowds. ²⁰All ate and were filled; and they took up the left-over broken pieces—filling twelve baskets. ²¹Those who ate were about five thousand men—in addition to women and children.

P: The Gospel of Our Lord!

C: Praise to you, O Christ.

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

Two things caught my eye about the gospel this week. (In large part, this is because of Rolf Jacobson's brilliant article this week in WorkingPreacher.com) The first is how intensely Jesus *feels* emotions. The first time he does might not be apparent because it is more implied than stated.

Right before today's reading Jesus had just received news that his cousin – his mentor? – has been murdered. That's when he got into a boat and went off by himself. We're not told what he does when he's off by himself, but if it's like the other times he goes off alone, he was also doing a lot of praying. He needed to commune with his father and begin to come to terms with the sudden news that a friend of his is dead. When a loved one dies it always catches me off guard, even when I knew it was coming. It is a deep and abiding grief that Jesus has entered. This is the context for what happens next. Before we get to what happens next, however, let us not rush past Jesus' strong emotions.

I don't know what you were taught about Jesus, but many have been put off by Christ's humanity. The fact that he experiences great sorrow, gets angry, loves a good party, etc., cause many to feel uncomfortable with the fact that in Jesus we see the fullest reflection of God. God can't possibly that....human?

So much of our theology – our ideas about God – come from Greek philosophical teachings, not the Bible. As Rolf Jacobson writes this week on Working Preacher,

Aristotle had viewed God as “the unmoved mover.” An “immortal, unchanging being” who initiated and undergirds all of reality, but who never changes. It was this view of God as one unchanging—and in fact incapable of being moved emotionally—that led the early Christian heretic Marcion to declare that the true God, far from being moved, was “a better God, who is neither offended nor does he get angry, nor does he take vengeance.”

That is NOT the God we hear about in the Bible. The God of Scriptures gets angry and jealous. The God we find in the Bible is a passionate God who pursues God's people. It is one of the scandals of the Bible, God being all emotional and stuff. Some of the early Christian heresies had to do with either a) making Jesus less than fully God *and* fully human, or b) getting rid of the awkwardness of the God of the old testament who was, let's face it, a bit smite-y at times. Have you ever read the book of Joshua??

I believe that our understanding of God has changed over the years. For instance, in the Old Testament there is little understanding of resurrection or “life” after death, at least until very late in the game. Throughout most of the OT, all of the dead simply went to sheol. By the time Jesus rolls around, however, there is a fully developed concept of the resurrection of the dead to eternal life. Not everyone is buying it (i.e. the Sadducees), but it's there. Was there no resurrection of the dead until the people conceived of it? I don't know anyone who would make that argument, so clearly, we have come to a different understanding of how God deals with the people after they die.

Or is it possible that God has changed her mind, and continues to do so, as we are able to receive it? As Jesus said in the upper room on the night of his betrayal, *I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.* ¹³ *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.* Whether God is changing God's mind or not, our understanding of God has most certainly evolved over the centuries.

In understanding things this way, we do not deny what happened in the Old Testament. We believe that it is still the same God in the NT and that the fullest manifestation of God is Jesus. And Jesus feels things deeply. We see this first in his reaction to John's murder.

The second time Jesus is deeply moved is right after he gets off the boat. The crowds had followed him on foot, and when Jesus gets out of the boat and sees them, “he had compassion for them.” This is an awfully weak translation of the Greek verb here. As Rolf Jacobson puts it, this verb

... really refers to a gut-wrenching, intestinal-twisting, visceral emotion of care. In the Gospels, it is never simply an emotion, it is a deep emotion that moves Jesus or another to saving action. It moves the so-called Good Samaritan to save the beaten man. It moves Jesus to heal one man and raise a woman's dead son. It moves a waiting father to have mercy on his prodigal son. And so on. Here, the deep compassion that Jesus has on the great crowd moves him first to heal their sick, and then to feed the masses.

I don't know about you, but I'm getting tired of feeling all my feelings. The fear of the future, my grief over so very many things, my anger over the injustices and cruelty in this world. I'm simply exhausted and would really like it if things just settled down a little so I could settle down a little...and feel much fewer of these overwhelming emotions. I think there's a term for this: Compassion fatigue, but that seems too small a term for what I'm experiencing.

And I believe, as Jesus did (more than once!), that it is absolutely necessary that we get away from the overwhelming mess that the world is in so much of the time. Apparently, it's even ok to take a nap in the back of the boat while there's a storm going on!

But this is not where we live. It is simply a rest along the way. And then we get back to the work of turning the world right-side up. Which means that we need to engage ourselves with the realities of the strong, gut-wrenching emotions that come with a compassionate heart. It is exhausting but so crucial that we stay engaged.

This compassion is always intended to lead to action, as it did with Jesus. As it is written in the book of James,

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Franciscan Richard Rohr founded an organization in 1987 called Center for Contemplation and Action. The reason for the founding of this organization and its name are because

... he saw a deep need for the integration of both action and contemplation. If we pray but don't act justly, our faith won't bear fruit. And without contemplation, activists burn out and even well-intended actions can cause more harm than good. In today's religious, environmental, and political climate our compassionate engagement is urgent and vital.

Part of following Jesus is to allow yourself to continue to let your heart to break over the pain and suffering in the world and in our life. Don't let your heart become hardened or uncaring during these troubling times. Yes, it is painful to acknowledge and allow yourself to really feel your heart breaking, but to do otherwise is to be dead inside.

How I wish that I didn't have to live in these days! How many lovely plans did *you* have that have been put on hold or died since this pandemic began? Will the plans that you made ever take place? Will the opportunities that were presented you – then jerked away when COVID appeared – will these opportunities ever come again?

But so much more than that, I grow exhausted by all of the violence and injustice that has been unleashed. I am worn out from the daily headlines. What more could go wrong??

In the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Frodo, a hobbit (which, if you haven't read the books or seen the movies, is a smaller, slightly furrier model of a human, quite insignificant in the big picture, or so it was believed), is tasked with destroying the most powerful and sought-after item in the world: the One Ring to rule them all. In order to do this, he must go deep behind enemy lines and throw this ring into the fires from which it was forged. It is a nearly impossible task, but he has many who help him along the way. Most significantly, his faithful friend and servant, Samwise, and Gandalf, a wise wizard.

At one point Frodo is bemoaning his situation to Gandalf, that *he* was the one who had to destroy the ring. *"I wish the Ring had never come to me,"* Frodo said. *"I wish it need not have happened in my time."* Gandalf replied to him,

"So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

And so it is with us. What shall we do with the time that has been given us?

So, Jesus spends all day curing all of the sick people who had followed him, and it's getting on supper time...and they're out in the middle of nowhere, not a McDonald's in sight. His disciples, God bless them, notice this and suggest to Jesus that he send them away so they can find some food. To which Jesus replied, *"They need not go away. You give them something to eat."* Well.

At this time I'm going to yield to Rolf Jacobson. I love how he describes what comes next!

If you listen deeply to the text, you can hear the disciples' stammering, flabbergasted astonishment. Stuttering and a little bit outraged, I love the first three words of their response even more than I love Jesus words. They say: "We've got

nothing.” Well, except for just 2-1/2 fish sandwiches between the 12 of them. Not really even enough for themselves and Jesus. So yeah, “We’ve got next to nothing.”

And with that, Jesus multiplied the food, fed the multitude, and had plenty left over.

As Jacobson continues, understand that he is writing to working preachers, like the very name of the website informs us: WorkingPreacher.com. I know that most of you listening to or reading this sermon are not “working preachers,” but I include you in this because I know that preachers, like me, are not the only ones who feel like we’ve got next to nothing these days.

Jacobson continues

And, Working Preacher, that’s good news for days in the middle of global pandemic when you, too, feel like, “I’ve got nothing—or next to nothing.” I’ve got next to nothing left for my people, next to nothing left for this ministry, next to nothing left for my family and friends, next to nothing left for this moment.

Good news. Next to nothing is Jesus’ favorite thing to work with.

Isn’t that marvelously good news! And it’s true of everything that is of the Spirit. Jesus always works with what we have, not what we don’t have. I know, it sounds pretty stupid when I say it out loud like that, but I think it’s so easy to forget.

In the early weeks and months after my wife, Vicki, died, I would sometimes describe myself as “hollowed out and whittled thin,” like there wasn’t very much of me. I felt like I was translucent, like light could be seen right through me. I hadn’t thought about feeling that way until just this last week in a conversation with a dear friend. And it occurred to me that, while I feel a whole lot more whole and stable than I did the first few months after Vicki’s death, I may still be a little translucent. Apparently, God can use even “hollowed out and whittled thin” me.

And God can work through whatever next to nothing you happen to have. Actually, I get the feeling, the more years I spend with the Bible, that doing amazing things with people who have next to nothing – except maybe a bad attitude and open resistance to where God is leading them – is one of God’s very favorite things to do!

Two quick things before I wrap this up. After the disciples tell Jesus that they’ve got next to nothing, he tells them to bring him the fish and loaves. He then takes them, blesses (or gives thanks for them), he breaks them and then gives them to the disciples. And yes, that’s supposed to sound familiar, like almost the same words you will hear before Jesus makes himself known to us again in the breaking of the bread later in this service...and yes, it is a model of how things work: give it all to Jesus and there will always be more than enough.

The second thing is, as far as any eye-witness reports of this would have told, it was the *disciples* who fed them, not Jesus. And if you asked any of the disciples about what had happened, they would tell you the truth – that they had next to nothing; they gave it to Jesus, who gave it back to them, and it was more than enough. They did next to nothing and yet probably 10,000 to 15,000 people (if you were to add in the women and children, like they were people or something!) had their fill that evening. And there was more left over than when they started!

You will do it, my dear friends. You have been doing it and will continue to do the work of turning the world right-side up, and you will get an amazing return on your labors when they are done abiding in the love of Jesus. You will know that you had next to nothing and yet...and yet, somehow God did it again!

As Rolf Jacobson put it so well, *Good news. Next to nothing is Jesus' favorite thing to work with.*

Amen.