

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

In our Gospel lesson today, we have the very well-known story of Jesus feeding *more* than five-thousand, “Those who ate were about five thousand men, *besides* women and children” (Matthew 14:21). We have all heard of the feeding of the five-thousand, with the five loaves and two fish. It’s a staple when teaching the miracles of Jesus to children and adults. And as miraculously glorious as this story is, it seems, within this passage, to draw attention away from an aspect of this passage that is for me, is just as miraculous.

Before we even get to the feeding today, we hear how Jesus is affected when he learns that John the Baptist was beheaded. He withdraws to a deserted place, away from others to be by himself. As I said, I think this feeding of this crowd of people is glorious, nonetheless, I want to focus on the reaction of Jesus to John’s death. I do so because, when I was a teenager living at home with my parents, some time ago, I would find myself retreating to my bedroom to play my guitar or paint when I was feeling down or feeling bad and wanted to be left alone. I came home late one afternoon and my mom meet me in the living room of our home with a newspaper in her arm. She said to me that I should probably go to my room and get my guitar, and then she handed me the paper that was in her arm. On the front page there was a story about a friend of mine along with her sister who were both killed the night before in a car accident. My room wasn’t a deserted place, although my mom probably would have called it that from time to time but it is where I would go to be by myself after that news.

Jesus didn’t go to his bedroom and grab his guitar, but there are times that we are like Jesus today in our Gospel, and find ourselves seeking solitude after something tragic happens. This time of solitude for Jesus throughout our Biblical narrative is explained and defined as a time that Jesus seeks quiet uninterrupted prayer...a time to talk to God the Father or a time to reflect and discern. But in this passage, Matthew does not tell us anything beyond Jesus withdrawing to a deserted place after he hears about John’s death. We don’t hear what takes place during this time of solitude, we can only assume what Jesus does because we do not hear anything other than he withdrew to a deserted place.

For us though, this time of solitude can be a time to protect our feelings and let our emotions out freely and safely. We seek solitude to seemingly avoid the things that will change us. We seem to, at times, live in fear of our feelings and maybe, just maybe we head off into solitude to argue and to rebuke God. No matter what we do in this time of solitude, it is a very human reaction, and this is what we see in Jesus today, a very human reaction to bad news...from one who, ironically has the power to change the situation.

After the initial impact of tragic news, we ask why and how. But this response, why and how are not questions, they are simply statements out of fear and frustration. Can you imagine the frustration of Jesus when he hears the news of the death of John the Baptist? Jesus felt strongly about John and was not afraid to say so publicly. According to Jesus, John was the greatest of all us on this side of the kingdom. Listen to Matthew’s account of how Jesus felt about John as Jesus says this:

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matt 11:11)

I was furious at the senseless death of my friend, and even more furious when I learned more details about the accident. And if I had the power that Jesus has, the power to command the wind and the waves to be still, the power to raise people from the dead, I would have been very tempted to command the wind and the waves to destroy those responsible and would have raised my friend and her sister up from the grave. But Jesus does not do this. Jesus does not retaliate with more violence and death. In his very human behavior, revealed in an emotional retreat into solitude by himself, we also see the very divinity of Jesus. We will see why Jesus does not retaliate later in this Gospel when Jesus is arrested and one of the slaves of the high priest is stuck with a sword and his ear is cut off. Jesus then says:

⁵²“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. (Matt 26:52)

For our desires to retaliate in the face of violence and tragedy only heightens the tragedy, the violence, and the hurt that we experience. We see so much retaliatory violence today in our culture, on the streets of our communities, in our politics and government, and around the world which merely serves to escalate the violence already in the world. The Rev. DR. Martin Luther King Jr. has brilliantly reminded us of the unseen, but authentic outcomes of a fall into retaliatory violence. He writes:

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate...Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”¹

In the darkness of the violence of John’s brutal death, Jesus shows us the light of his forbearance as the crowds draw him out of that solitude. Jesus does not demand that the crowds go away, we do not see him violently or even angrily driving the them away. In that moment we see the light of his compassionate forbearance as he gathers the crowds, heals them, and then feeds them.

In our first lesson today from Second Isaiah we have an image of God’s love and mercy that gathers folks in and does not drive them away. The images of God’s compassion and power is not power that divides, brutalizes, individualizes, silences, or oppresses, God’s power is compassion that is manifested in love and mercy that gathers one another together, lifts up and dignifies through healing, and nurtures and feeds the gathering. Isaiah proclaims this just before our lesson today:
...with great compassion I (*the Lord*) will gather you. (Isaiah 54:7b)

And we see in our Gospel lesson the power of the Lord coming to life in that gathering. Jesus is recognized as hope and comfort presented in a meal of abundance, enough for a crowd of people, enough for all and given freely. In his initial response to that brutal death, we see a human display of solitude. But in the crowd of people seeking him in his tomb of solitude, we see his forbearance and his mercy and love in the form of healing and a meal...happening within a crowd.

¹ Washington, James W.. *A Testament of Hope, The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*. New York: Harper Collins, 1986. Part II / Famous Sermons and Public Addresses, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967) page 249

We will however, still continue to retreat in solitude and we will continue to feel that God has abandoned us or feel that God is hidden from us. But the Good News we see today is that Jesus knows our emotions, he even reflects them in his desire to be by himself. But because Jesus does this, he shows that God does not reject us. Rather, he meets us in the solitude of our pain and gathers us all by inviting us to a simple meal.

In this gathering today there is healing in the Word that is Jesus Christ and there is the assurance of His presence in this meal that is Jesus Christ. God's mercy and love is poured out for us in abundance today in Word and in Sacrament with the notion that the more we receive the more we can give...and this does not happen in solitude. God through His servant St. Paul in a letter reminds the church in Rome:

¹We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ²Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. ³For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written:

"The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." ⁴For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. ⁵May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15:1-7)

While for some our burdens may cause us to seek solitude away from others, nonetheless we all have come to the Lord in a gathering, a crowd to worship this day carrying many different and very heavy burdens. May the rest for your burden be the comfort of knowing that the Lord is gracious and full of compassion, the Lord Jesus Christ is rest...NOT just for our souls but for the souls of all. This compassion and love for us is not because we have done something good or that we have loved God, it is because God has met us in the darkness of our solitude and has given us all the light of his compassion, found within this gathering.

It is in this gathering today that God feeds us and nurtures us with that abundant love and mercy made know to us all in this gathering around Jesus Christ. While the darkness of life's trials, tribulations, and tragedies may drive us to be by ourselves, we are never alone. It is in that darkness that we are closest to God through the promise of mercy and life through Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.