



Scripture and Sermon

August 2, 2020

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Matthew 14:13-21

13 Now when Jesus heard this, 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. **14** When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. **15** 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." **16** Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." **17** They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." **18** And he said, "Bring them here to me." **19** 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. **20** And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. **21** And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Faithful and Giving God,

Thank you for this chance to dig into, discuss, and learn from your word. Bless this time and be present with us, help us to be open to what you want us to hear this morning. Open our hearts and minds to receive and grow.

In your son's name, Amen.

With the higher amount of free time that I have, but also faced with continued quarantine, I have spent a lot of time watching netflix and youtube, especially while puttering around doing other things. I have ended up falling into topics that I have never explored before, wouldn't have really thought were my cup of tea. But alas, here I found myself this week, watching video after video on youtube channel called "Ask a Mortician," the channel is by Caitlin Doughty, who according to her Wikipedia bio is: "an American mortician, author, blogger, and YouTube personality known for advocating death acceptance and the reform of Western funeral industry practices." She is one of the founders of the "Death Positive" movement which at its most basic is "a social and philosophical movement that encourages people to speak openly about death, dying, and corpses." One of the things that has resonated with me through her videos is the

idea that we Americans have gotten to a place where we don't like to have to deal with the hard emotional stuff around death and loss, and we would do well to reconnect with how to healthily process them, instead of distancing ourselves from them as much as possible. Cheery, right?

So you might be asking yourself at this point, what in the heck does this have to do with the feeding of the five thousand? A good question! So, this passage that we read this morning of the feeding of the five thousand starts with an introduction of how we get to this scene with the miraculous feeding. I had never paid it much attention until I read through the gospel from start to finish in one go while in seminary. The passage this morning starts with "13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." What was Jesus hearing? What it was makes all the difference for me. The preceding verses tell the story of the beheading and death of John the Baptist, ending with "10 [Kind Herod] sent and had John beheaded in the prison. 11 The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. 12 His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus." I'll continue: "13 Now when Jesus heard this, 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. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."

Jesus had heard of the brutal death of his cousin, ministry partner, and faithful believer. It was this news of this loss that prompted Jesus to withdraw from the crowds, his disciples, and go to a place to pray by himself. Our Jesus, the Jesus who shares divinity with God and Spirit, the Jesus who came to bring about the eternal Kingdom with God, the Jesus who knew he would conquer death, hears of the death of his dear friend John, and doesn't shrug it off, doesn't say that continuing his work of healing, teaching, and saving was more important; he decidedly takes time in that moment to attend to the grief and mourn his friend through prayer and solitude. When I think of the ways that we talk about Jesus feeling all the things we do as humans, even grief, it is easy to land on the line from the story of Lazarus where it says, "Jesus wept." But this moment, of Jesus mourning the loss of John, is but a blip before we move on to the exciting and positive story of Jesus miraculously feeding five thousand people. The way that we focus on the miracle and not the moment of mourning that Jesus has, speaks to the way that we all like to focus on the happy feelings and actions when it comes to Jesus instead of the sad or tough feelings, like how Jesus models for us a practice of grief. Perhaps, if we were a bit more Death Positive about this story, we can find some deeper truths about ourselves, Jesus, and our relationship with Jesus.

One of the most important things that this one sentence that acts as an introduction to the miracle story tells us is that Jesus was not flippant about loss. Jesus heard about John's death and did not just say "that's too bad" in the moment and move

on. He didn't ignore his feelings, push them down and keep moving forward. Jesus put a full pause on his schedule, told everyone to hold on (which they didn't pay attention to), and went onto a boat by himself to cross the water to spend time processing that loss and grief. This is SUCH an important lesson to us right now in this time of the pandemic and isolation.

It is a time of stress, anxiety, uncertainty, loneliness, but perhaps more than all of it, it is a time full of loss. There are the obvious things we have lost, like those who have died, special events, time with friends, but the level of loss for all of us is higher than perhaps we have been able to fully acknowledge. In my Pastoral Care and Counseling class we spent some time reading a book called "All Our Losses, All our Griefs" which outlines six types of losses that we experience during our life. Some are more obvious and some capture a loss that I had not thought of before. They are: **relationship loss, role loss, material loss, functional loss, systemic loss and intrapsychic loss.**

Relationship loss is defined in the book as: ending of opportunities to relate oneself to, talk with, share experiences with, make love to, touch, settle issues with, fight with, and otherwise be in the emotional and/or physical presence of a particular other human being. This one includes the obvious loss when someone dies, but we can also experience it with a break-up or a move. For example, my grandfather passed away in the beginning of April from COVID-19 meaning we all have lost our relationship with him, but in a very different way I have also experienced relationship loss as I finished seminary and had to move away from all of those friends. COVID has made losing relationships through death or other ways so much harder as we have not been able to have the same kind of funeral or closing rituals. For me, these losses were magnified by being unable to gather for them and so they still feel like loose ends in a lot of ways.

Next is **Role Loss**. It is: loss of a specific role or of one's accustomed place in a social network. That could happen when a child's parents die and they are no longer actively someone's child, or vice versa for a parent, it happens when a spouse dies and you are no longer that person's spouse in the same way. It can also happen with something as simple as leaving a job position. This is one that I don't know if I have experienced much of during this time of pandemic, but I imagine it could be happening for teachers who haven't been able to be the teacher they always strive to be while doing school virtually or with mailed-home packets. Perhaps I have had a little of this as I have not gotten to live into my role as Pastor in the way that I know it would be if times were more normal.

Next up is **material loss**, which is: loss of a physical object or familiar surroundings to which one has an important attachment. Another fairly clear one, but is loss of things like a childhood home or family heirloom, or bigger when something like a fire happens and someone loses everything. On the surface it doesn't seem like this one would be a big player during COVID-times, but I think we have been experiencing it as we

have so missed getting to have worship in our church building. We miss those material things that make a space feel like church for us. We miss those familiar and sacred surroundings.

Next up is **functional loss**, which is when we lose some of the muscular or neurological functions of the body. This is pretty clear, it is a loss of physical or mental ability. I wonder if we are also seeing this a bit now, as during quarantine many who would normally have more freedom to their life have had to become very limited. I think of people like my grandparents, or from here Margaret and Rose, who have the physical and mental ability normally to have visitors and go on excursions, but in the midst of this, their age and vulnerability to this virus mean they have to stay home and isolated in new ways. So even though it is not because of internal causes, they are experiencing functional loss as they are not able to live life as they want. Perhaps all of us are experiencing this, especially as we were in the tightest parts of quarantine and everything felt so out of our control.

Next is **systemic loss**, which is loss of part of an interactional system that led to patterns of behavior, so that we counted on that part for certain functions, and so the loss affects the whole system. This is most often seen in things like when a child moves out and leaves the parents as empty-nesters, the loss for the whole family when someone passes. It is a loss that when this one part is gone, the whole dynamic shifts without it. We experience this in the church when there is a pastoral transition. I know that you all are experiencing a systemic loss as Pastor Andrew left, and have experienced this loss more frequently than a lot of churches have in the last handful of years. I am sure that this one has been harder as the months leading up to his leaving you didn't get to see him in person and you didn't get to say goodbye like you normally would have.

Last is **Intrapsychic loss**, which I think is perhaps the easiest for us to overlook in our own lives, but is perhaps the biggest loss for us these last four months. It is the experience of losing an emotionally important image of oneself, losing the possibilities of "what might have been," abandonment of plans for a particular future, the dying of a dream. Although often related to external experiences, it is itself an entirely inward experience. In normal days, the examples would be things like a dream career not working out, a sudden shift in self-image, or missing out on the chance to go on your dream trip. It is the bucket list losses. For me, it has been the losses of graduation, goodbyes with my field site, our wedding with everyone and everything we imagined, and starting out my first appointment normally. For high schoolers it was the loss of prom, for Hopkins it was the loss of summer festivals like for Fourth of July, for our church it was not getting to welcome the new babies into our church family with baptism. For many it is the loss of vacations, time with friends, just a normal spring and summer. It is easy to overlook these, but when they stack up, they weigh heavily on us.

Sometimes these losses happen in isolation, but more often we experience more than one of these at the same time or in the aftermath of a single event. I spent so much time on explaining them because recognizing what the losses are is crucial to grieving. That's because grieving is the reaction to or processing of loss. We have grief because of loss. We can cry and grieve, but without acknowledging what it is that is causing the grief, it will be very hard to process it and come out the other side. Some don't like to grieve and so do all they can to not let the loss affect them, pushing through and forward. We are more likely to do this when life is stressful. We keep busy, we keep going on with our schedule, we push the bad feelings to the background. But bottling up negative feelings almost never ends well. Our losses deserve to be acknowledged and be given the grief they deserve. It is okay to allow that vulnerability with yourself. Even Jesus, divine Son of God, allowed loss to affect him and gave himself some space to grieve.

During this pandemic we have all experienced some form of these losses, it has been many months of these losses now while also being deprived from being able to gather with those that we would usually process those losses with. This one little sentence from Matthew 14:13 acts as a reminder of the importance of taking time to process loss and allow for grieving no matter what is going on and no matter how big or small the loss is. If Jesus could take a pause from his world changing ministry, then surely we can take time in our lives to give ourselves a moment to feel the real feelings of loss and grief.

How do we process grief though? I believe that the best way to do that is different for different people. Some need to be like Jesus and take time by themselves to think, reflect, and/or pray. Some like or need to use rituals, big ones like funerals or small ones like lighting a candle for those who are lost. Some need to process by talking it out with friends or a counselor. Some need a good cry. When I lost my grandpa this Spring, we couldn't have a funeral, so I spent intentional time looking at pictures of him, reminiscing with my cousins, and eating a couple of his favorite foods. For other things, I have let out a good cry, saying out loud all the things I have missed or wish could be like normal. Whatever works for you, but it is important to do it to find peace.

No matter what style of grieving works best for you, our faith can be so helpful to us while grieving. We know from this passage and others that Jesus fully knows and understands the deep feelings that come with loss and grief, so much so that Jesus himself had to practice grief. So, we can bring our grief to Jesus and know that he gets it. But furthermore, the story that follows up this moment of grief for Jesus reminds us of the kind of God we have: one who even when feeling the weight of loss and injustice, keeps giving to those of us who need him. When we think about what state of mind Jesus is in when sailing out on that boat (sad, grieving, upset at the unjust killing of John), and that the people didn't want to leave him alone and so they follow him around

the body of water on foot and meet him at where he comes ashore, we can imagine how we might react to them. But when Jesus sees this he doesn't get exasperated, he doesn't get irate, he doesn't scold them for not letting him have ONE MINUTE ALONE! The text says, "He had compassion for them and cured their sick." And he spent the day with them, healing and teaching and even then after he gives them what they wanted from him, he still doesn't respond by pushing them away. He tells the Disciples that we are not going to send these people home hungry. This juxtaposition of these two moments, Jesus giving himself space and time to grieve, and putting aside his needs for the needs of the people is who we get to go to when we are experiencing loss. We have a savior who does understand our feelings so deeply, but that gives and gives to us as we need, helping to heal our hurts.

This miracle story of the loaves and fishes feeding the multitudes has a whole bunch of stuff that I could talk about based on what the scholars have to say about what really happened and what it means, but now is not the sermon to dig into all that. What I can say, is that no matter what all the details mean, this story is one who portrays our God in Christ meeting human need. We are assured by the entirety of this passage that taking time to grieve a loss or losses is so important that Jesus does it, and that when we are the ones that are hurting that we can depend on God to be a support to us, bringing healing to our wounds and sustenance to keep going.

I would be remiss if I didn't make some time for us to put my words into action. So I am going to invite Mike to come up and play us our praise song from earlier as background, and invite you to spend the time of that song, thinking about the losses that you have felt in the last months. The things that you never imagined would be a loss or something to grieve. The things that you thought were too small to be feeling loss about them. The things that you didn't allow yourself to feel bad about because it was the smartest decision to not do it. You can use the sermon notes page in your bulletin, or any blank space to make a list if writing them out would help you acknowledge them. You can also just hold them in your mind. You can pray in many words, or just sit in the presence of God. You can take this time to grieve those losses or you can use it to just acknowledge the loss and think about how you would like to take time to grieve those losses more privately. Blessings of this time between you and God.

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*Loving and Gracious God,*

*Your presence is here among us, you hear our cries, you see our loss, and you know what it feels like. You guide us to not be afraid of acknowledging loss and spending time with grief. Thank you for this time you were with us this morning. Thank you for the*

*ways your presence was felt and that even when we don't feel you, we know that you are with us. Help us and support us during this continued season of loss, uncertainty, and anxiety. Help us to all process our loss and grief healthily so that we can be maintained through the rest of the pandemic and keep ourselves as safe as we can. Thank you for the sustenance you provide for us when we need it to keep going. We pray all these things in your son's wonderful name, Amen.*