

10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
August 6, 2023
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Matthew 14:13-21

“Miracles of Abundance”

In my first year of seminary I was able to participate in one of the most amazing experiences of my life - traveling to Turkey as part of a study seminar to learn about the travels of the Apostle Paul and the history of early church in Asia minor. There is really no way to fully capture what it is like to stand in a places like the ancient city of Ephesus, a place that until then had only been a name on the pages of scripture for me, to not only be in the places but also to be surrounded by the culture and context that shaped the earliest Christian believers. While many of the places we visited started to blur together in a jumble of white marble columns, as we explored each site that connected us to our ancient church roots I did notice certain patterns emerging in the symbology etched in stucco and mosaic tile. What I saw come up again and again were not symbols crosses and crucifixes - which were abundant in the Orthodox and Catholic churches we visited, but symbols depicting water, bread, and fish. These symbols, not crosses, were the first symbols of the church, marking and identifying the community.

Today's scripture text is the miracle story of “the Feeding of the 5000.” It is in fact the only miracle story, apart from the resurrection, that is included in all 4 gospels. So knowing that and knowing that the church's first symbols were fish and loaves, we can see how central this story is to the early Church's understanding of who Christ was and who they were as followers of Jesus. Many Biblical scholars suggest that this story was in fact part of the first communion liturgies in the church, as the community observed the eucharist and shared a full meal together as part of their worship. Today we will celebrate holy communion together and in doing so we are connected to Christians in every time and place, all the way back to these first ancient communities, where we too will remember the gift of

Christ's sacrifice, be nourished in body and soul with the bread and cup, and experience the abundance of God's grace.

As we delve deeper into this story, uncovering the lessons that made it so meaningful for the early Christians, I think it's important we orient ourselves in the context of Matthew's narrative. The Common English Bible translation helps us do this a little better than the NRSV, beginning with the story with these verses -

¹³When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. ¹⁴When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick.

This news that Jesus heard "about John," that's John the Baptist, was of his death. That story occurs in the preceding verses, if you want to go back and read it, but I warn you, John's death is not exactly one that we include in our children's picture bibles. Truthfully, John's gruesome and traumatic execution at the hands of King Herod, is a scene that could more rightly be ripped from pages of a Game of Thrones script, as his head is served up on a platter in a manner of maccabe entertainment for King Herod's dinner guests. And this kind of news likely left Jesus with a grief and a sense of terror we can only imagine, knowing his close friend, cousin, even mentor, was dead and killed in such a horrific way, we can begin to understand his need to escape and get away to a "deserted place." It is here in this wilderness that the stage has been set for Jesus to demonstrate the compassion, the healing, and the miracles of abundance of God's kingdom that stand in stark contrast to the darkness and scarcity of Herod's Kingdom and the Roman Empire he represents.

When the crowds show up in the wilderness, they too are reacting to John's death, perhaps they are angry, riled up, and also grieving a beloved teacher and leader - after all John had quite the following long before Jesus came on the scene. Jesus reacts to their intrusion upon his solitude not in fear or even annoyance or resentment, but instead he is moved to compassion. He sees their grief, their ailments, and their hunger and meets those needs with care and love. Miracles abound as the Holy Spirit moves through the hearts of those in the crowd and the hearts of the disciples as each are reoriented from a

mindset of the scarcity of the kingdoms of this world, to one of the abundance of God's beloved community – where all are healed and made whole and not only is there enough to go around, but there are leftovers and all are left full and satisfied.

The symbols of the loaves and fish are central to the Christian faith, because they not only point to who God is – the one who provides us life and life abundant, but they also point to who we are supposed to be – those who participate in this abundance with our own generosity and self-giving. When the disciples see the crowd they ask Jesus, “what are we going to do with all these people? They are hungry, it's getting late, we should just send them all home.” And Jesus' answer is – “There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat.” Jesus is empowering his disciples to join him in this miracle work. They are to play an important role in making sure all are fed, there's no need to send anyone away hungry, but it will require imagination, creativity, some good old fashioned problem solving skills, and the gifts of the whole community.

There are many circumstances and events that land us in desolate wilderness places. Perhaps like Jesus we are in the midst of grief over the loss of a loved one, a divorce, a separation, a loss of a job, a change in career, a decline in health or ability. Or like the disciples and the crowds we are overcome with fear and anxiety as we struggle to maintain our mental health, as we worry about our children, our parents, the bills to be paid, and the state of our society and country as a whole. The wilderness is naturally not an easy place to be in. It is by definition a place of little resources and difficulty, but the Wilderness in the Bible is more than just a place, it is symbolic of change, transition, of moving from one not only physical place to another, but a complete reorientation from one way of life to another. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness, as they transitioned from Pharaoh's economy of slavery and scarcity to God's economy of liberation and abundance. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, leaving behind any ambitions for earthly power to submit himself completely to God's will as he set his feet on the path of his ministry, knowing it would lead him to the cross.

The wilderness is where God does some of God's best work. Where God showcases God's miracles, and those miracles still abound around us today. They are the friends who call to check in on us.

They are flowers and the casseroles that show up at our doors. They are the various 12-step and support groups that help us to know we aren't alone in our struggles. They are the cases of water being supplied to the community fridge at Okra Abbey to help make sure our neighbors at least have access to a cold drink in this unrelenting heat. They are the peels of laughter and squeals of delight coming from the Land Building Lawn as Carrollton Camp children freely play outside and enjoy the simple pleasures of childhood.

Ordinary symbols that point us to an extraordinary grace. That is what the loaves and fishes represent. This is also what our cup and bread on the communion table represent - ordinary things for ordinary people that reminds us that even in this wilderness God is present, leading us through, providing for our needs along the way, giving us companions for the journey, and giving us strength and courage to go out and feed others, sharing from the abundance of what we have been given.