

**Message Delivered at Christ Church**  
**July 30<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011**  
**TEXT: Matthew 14:13-21**  
**Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

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Sometimes rough stuff happens. Sometimes, things happen that throw us for a loop; maybe knock us off our stride a bit; leave us, maybe, a bit shocked...so that the only way to be brought back to center is to retreat. And in military parlance, retreat is different from running away. Running away is a panicked action. A retreat is orderly, disciplined, with an eye on a further purpose beyond the temporary redeployment.

Well, there are things that happen in life the only response to which is to retreat...for some rest; for some prayer; maybe for some perspective to see where God is at work when it doesn't seem obvious that God is at work.

Well, let me tell you...Jesus had a friend. And his name was John; and we know him as John the Baptist. And he wasn't just a friend, but a relative. Luke tells us that John was six months older than Jesus. John's mother Elizabeth, and Jesus' mother Mary, were cousins...which made John and Jesus cousins. They were family to one another.

Whether they played with one another as children; whether they got into mischief with one another as all children seem to do; whether they wrestled, or studied Torah together, or ran off together at family reunions is something we don't know. Scripture is silent on that. But my hunch...and it's just my hunch...is that they probably did; simply because that's what kids do; that's what cousins do.

Regardless, by the time the Gospel writers pick up their story, their lives were intertwined. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John...and even Acts...testify to John's role in the Gospel. He was a prophet and a witness. The people flocked to him. He baptized in the Jordan. He baptized Jesus in the Jordan. John is the one who pointed to Jesus, and Jesus praised John. "Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist," Jesus said. A pretty high compliment.

Well, John fell afoul of Herod the King; called him out on his immoral behavior. So Herod found a way to get him arrested; and then made a foolish promise to people wiler than he. It's a repulsive story. The short version is that Salome danced; and as a reward, before all the dignitaries at dinner, claimed John's head on a platter. Herod, cornered by his own pride and intemperance, produced it. And John the Baptist was dead, and the powers of evil appeared to have won a round.

And I'm telling you this, because that's what happens immediately before this story we heard tonight. John the Baptist has just been killed, and afterwards they come and tell Jesus about it; and Matthew says that it's when he heard this news that he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself, which is where this story takes place.

What Jesus was thinking to himself after all this, Matthew doesn't say. Thank goodness, the scriptures never psychologize Jesus. But they knew one another closely, and John's mission complemented Jesus' mission. And we all know Jesus is fully divine. He's God, the Son; God incarnate. But we also know that he's fully human; he's the most human human being there's ever been; the only fully human human being to ever walk this earth. Which means, I believe, that the things we feel he feels even more intensely...loss, grief, disappointment. He loved John,

and so when he hears of his death at the hand of Herod he goes to the deserted and lonely place we hear about tonight.

So I'll ask you...ever been to your own lonely place? Ever gotten hit hard, so that the best thing to do is retreat?

Well, y'all...we have all heard this story before. It's very well known. And it works in a few different ways. And it's an important story because it's the only miracle story that's told in all four gospels. That means it's one of those stories that from the very beginning had legs, and that the first communities of believers all seemed to know, and all seemed to believe vital to tell and hear more than once.

On a summer weekend, we're 500 people gathered here to worship; all sorts and conditions, coming from different places, different things going on, bringing our stuff. Some with a bounce in our step, ready to tackle what's coming. It's great when it's that way. But some of us...for all different kinds of reasons...are in a lonely place; and one thing this story tells is that when we end up in that lonely place, we don't end up there alone; that it may be in the lonely places we find Jesus, and he finds us. Because in this story, that's where he goes.

This is a crowd that follows him; a lovely crowd. 5,000 people is vastly larger than most of the villages these people lived in. And they are an endearing group, because all of them have gotten out of their easy chair and left their home, because of their deep desire to be with Jesus. They've put up with the traffic on I-95, and the kids crying in the backseat, and the long lines at the port-o-potties because they have been called out by the rumor that maybe Jesus will be found at the other side of the lake. The Lord smiles upon the seeking heart, and that's what they have...seeking hearts; so they've left something behind, which we usually need to do if we're ever going to bring ourselves forward.

Now there's something curious about the way Matthew tells this story which I think is worth noticing. I mentioned that all four gospel writers tell this story; but they don't all tell it the same way. I hope that doesn't freak us out. After all, if I asked four of you to write a description of what happened at this worship service today you wouldn't describe it the same way but that wouldn't make one of you right and three of you wrong. Each of you would be right in some way.

John's story is the most different of the four; and, of course, John is always the most different. But when Mark and Luke tell this story, they both say that Jesus taught. That he spoke. "He taught them many things," Mark writes, to this crowd. "He spoke to them (the crowd) of the Kingdom of God," says Luke.

But here in Matthew, there's no mention of Jesus talking to the crowd. His only initial response to their arrival, Matthew says, is to have compassion on them; which means, most literally, to "suffer with." And isn't it true there are times when any words are just too many words? What agonies and trials they brought with them specifically, we don't know. Just as we don't know what we each bring when we leave our homes and come together. But some of us bring something. They did, too. And he took them on, and stood with them in that lonely place; and offered them himself, and offered them wholeness.

So in every story there are characters; and in reading the scriptures, we place ourselves in the role of the characters. And the fact is that sometimes, we're the crowd. We're just bringing it; limping to the lonely place; hoping that Jesus will show up; and he does; to be with us. "I am with you always, to the end of the ages," Jesus says at the end of Matthew's Gospel.

Another character in this story is the disciples.

Now what happens is that it seems they're there all day. Evening comes. And he's been healing. And there are 5000 people there. And that's a lot of people to be in the middle of nowhere. They haven't had a square meal; and folks are getting hungry; and there's nothing to eat.

And so the disciples say something that is completely reasonable: "Send them away to the villages so they can get something to eat."

Now sometimes, this response from the disciples has been interpreted as a sort of brushing off. "It's quitting time; let's get rid of them." I don't see it that way at all. I see it as a completely reasonable solution to the problem. It's late; they're hungry; there's no food; there's food in the villages; let's send them there. It's not a perfect solution—might not be that the area villages would have enough bread for 5000 guests—but left to their own devices, it's the best solution they could see.

And then he says something that should stop us in our tracks: "You give them something to eat." You do it.

And I got to tell you, I think he said that with a smile. Remember "double-dog dares?" Being a kid, and a friend, or a sister, or a brother, or a cousin saying "I double-dog dare you to eat that worm;" "I double-dog dare you to call her on the phone." I wonder whether before Matthew gussied this whole thing up, what Jesus really said was "I double-dog dare you to give them something to eat."

Let me ask you...ever been times when you've looked at what's in front of you, and been absolutely convinced that you can't. When you have looked around and seen how overwhelming and difficult it is—whatever "it" might be—and you just start saying to yourself "I'm not enough;" or "it's not enough?" When there's a job to do, and it's time to step up, and a moment comes to do something difficult, and you don't think you can? It's a sad sign of the human condition that our default setting seems to be to look at the cup as half empty when really it runneth over, and to assume scarcity is more powerful than abundance. I mean, what's five loaves and two fishes among so many? And who does Jesus think we are? Miracle workers?

Well, apparently yes. Apparently he believes we can give the crowds something to eat; that it's important that we do it, and that through the mercy of God we can. Maybe because John's death has brought into focus his own; or maybe just because it's time; he says to his disciples "you can do it; and I dare you to give it a try." I'm sure all of us have had those moments in our lives when we've been encouraged on to new heights because someone who loves us has gently said "You can do it." And then, when we've sat in our self-doubt followed it with a chuckle, and an "I double-dog dare ya..."

And maybe because that's exactly what he does here; and because we all need to hear that from time to time, and because our human tendency towards approaching life from a scarcity perspective so easily blinds us to the abundant life God promises...each one of the gospel writers tells this story.

He doesn't leave us to do the feeding on our own. After all, he's the one in this story who takes and blesses and breaks and gives. And as we all know, because he did that, we do the same thing every time we worship. He does that part. But he tells us to give the crowd something to eat; because he trusts us with his ministry; he gives it to us; and maybe, because like him, we've had compassion on one another.

You will notice that I have not spoken at all about what actually happened in that wilderness place. I don't know whether enough for 5000 popped out of the ground; or fell down from heaven; or suddenly everyone's backpack go heavier; or whether as some who need

rational explanations have suggested that when the crowd saw Jesus share, they decided to share. That's because in the end it doesn't make a difference. Not even the gospel writers explain it. Let's not lose the forest for the trees, and let's not let the special effects overwhelm the story.

The point of the story is that the crowd went to the wilderness; and he went there, too. The point of the story is that to our question of scarcity God answers with abundance; that probably few of us have everything we want; but because God is good we do, at least, have our daily bread. And the point of the story is that when it comes to the crowds—the crowds in here, and the crowds out there—we disciples have been given what we need to give and serve others. We may not think that we can; but Jesus does, and he isn't at all interested in us playing small. Elsewhere he tells a story of some having ten talents and some having one; and that how many we have doesn't make a difference; just that we use them because that's why we've been given them.

And if we're afraid, and don't think we can, and if every reasonable assessment seems to point to failure as the only possibility...well, I think he fills us up with a little bit more, and takes our hand, and gives us a smile...

“I double-dog dare you...”