

WORSHIPED

Matthew 14:13-33

EPIPHANY 7

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Last week we concluded three consecutive Sundays of Narrative Lectionary readings taken from Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount, which appears in Chapters Five through Seven in Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew reminds his hearers and readers at the end of this sermon that the crowd reacted with astonishment.

This was because Jesus, unlike the scribes (the teachers of the law), had taught as one having authority.

The scribes, it seems, exercise authority by citing another authority.

In contrast, Jesus uses no written references, and teaches as the One who has the authority to determine what is authoritative.

What He says cannot be separated from who He is and how He says what He says.

In other words, what He teaches is what He does.

Is it any wonder that people are astonished at this Teacher and His teachings?

With that said, this morning we skip over the next six chapters in Matthew's Gospel, arriving at two well-known miracle stories — the feeding of the 5,000, and Jesus' walking on the water and Peter's wish to walk out to Him.

However, before addressing these miracles which demonstrate Jesus' teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, let us first examine the reason for Jesus to withdraw from the crowd by boat in order to be alone in a deserted place.

We are told what Jesus has just heard occurred in the previous passage.

His friend and forerunner, John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod as a party favor for his stepdaughter.

It is no wonder that Jesus needed some time alone to pray and, doubtlessly, to grieve.

Jesus is not the only one to hear the gruesome news.

We are told that the crowds had also heard the news of John's execution at Herod's hands.

The people are understandably frightened, and are seeking Jesus for comfort

and guidance.

Thus, while He is out in a boat on the sea, they follow Him on foot from shore.

Between the lines of Matthew's Gospel narrative, one can almost imagine Jesus sensing His own death drawing nearer because of John's demise.

In anticipation of that coming reality, Jesus is thinking about how to prepare for the continuation of God's ministry among the people.

What we encounter in this very familiar passage may be just one of the primary messages of what it means to be disciples and to carry forward Jesus' ministry in His absence.

Jesus comes ashore and sees a great crowd.

He feels their pain and sees their fear.

He realizes their longing for hope and a word of encouragement, and He has compassion on them.

He continues doing what He has been doing in His Galilean ministry — He heals the sick.

He spends the day in ministry among them until night begins to fall.

In the next section of this passage, we encounter our own human failings as the disciples try to dodge the responsibilities of ministry.

They know the people have expectations and needs.

Rather than lean into Christ with trusting faith, they begin to drown in their own fears of insufficiency.

They ask Jesus to make a public announcement to send the people back to their homes.

They don't want to deal with providing the masses with a means of relieving their hunger.

Their need seems too overwhelming, and the responsibility too great.

Jesus is quick and clear in His response.

He briefly phrases a vision of the Kingdom of Heaven and His trust in His followers.

“They need not go away; you give them something to eat” (v. 16).

The first half of the command, ***“they need not go away,”*** is a call to remain together, even when the needs of the group might seem too great.

In community, as the gathered people of God, we find out what each other truly needs.

By worship and prayer, we find we have enough to meet our needs, and often

more.

In his Letter to the Ephesians (4:12), Paul tells us that each of us has been given a gift ***“for building up the body of Christ.”***

Rather than supporting an ethos of “every one for himself or herself,” Christ invites us to stay together, draw closer, and discover ways to keep and care for one another.

In remaining together, we may find possibilities to give comfort and to satisfy both physical and spiritual hungers.

The other half of Jesus’ command, ***“You give them something to eat,”*** is a profound shift in responsibility.

For the most part, Jesus has been doing all the ministry — the preaching, teaching, and healing.

But now, in this moment, Jesus calls His disciples to step up and reject the myth of scarcity.

At first His disciples remain almost paralyzed to act, stuck in their limited experience of having to take leadership roles, such as need assessment, resource allowance, and the recruitment of helping hands.

They balk and protest about limited resources.

There is not nearly enough food to go around.

There is no way to do what Jesus wants done.

They seem to have forgotten the many miracles they have already witnessed.

We know this chapter in our own lives as well.

We know the familiar feeling of being overwhelmed by what is expected of us.

The needs and challenges that surround us seem insurmountable.

Pick the challenges the Church-at-large and our own congregation face.

There is decreasing worship attendance and envelope giving, increasing senior membership, as well as the number of those with chronic diseases and disabilities.

There are also the worries that come from not having the next generations available to us for passing along the faith.

Beyond our congregation, our community seems burdened with addicts, poverty, unemployment, abuse, and family breakdown — needs beyond the ability of our resources.

We revert to our own narrow ways of thinking, hoping that things will return to a past where America did not have the divisions and differences we are facing as a nation.

We remember times when churches and Sunday schools were bulging in

attendance, and when Christianity was the mainstream and mainline faith.

We are so paralyzed by fear and anxiety that we forget the times that God entered in unexpectedly and made a way when there seemed no way.

From the parting of the Red Sea to stilling storms, with manna and miracles abounding, our memories are short when our minds are anxious, our resources few, and night is falling.

Finally Jesus speaks and gives them the solution that they need.

“Bring them here to me,” He says, calling for the five loaves and two fish (v.18).

“Bring them here to me,” He says, and you can almost hear the disciples breathing a collective sigh of relief, lowering their eyes in embarrassment that they did not think of turning to Jesus for help sooner.

“Bring them here to me,” He says, and one wonders whether He is talking about the people themselves, or the loaves and fishes.

The disciples obey, and Jesus invites everyone to be seated for the bounty that is about to be poured out upon the gathered community.

Is it really that simple?

Faith tells us that the antidote to the toxic doses of fear and anxiety, along with the blaring messages of insufficiency, is found in taking the meager bits and pieces of what we have, and inviting Jesus to bless them and make them even more for us and others.

Over and over again, this invitation and promise are echoed in scripture.

Paul tells the Corinthians:

“My grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness”
(2 Cor. 12:9).

Our primary limitation is not a lack of resources, but our amnesia, our forgetting to offer up what we have been given to the One whose desire it is to bless us.

God in Christ stands ready to heal, redeem, restore and reconcile.

Our role is to take the responsibility in offering up our part, and seeking with all that we are, to be partners in God’s continuing mission on earth.

All of this begins with worship.

Last Tuesday, at the monthly Council meeting, I delved deeper into the 20/20 Vision of the Church for 2020.

I expressed our need to recondition our ‘ships,’ as in worship, fellowship,

stewardship, and discipleship.

Much of my time and energy in the time we have left together as pastor and people will be spent in revisioning existing ministries, envisioning essential new ones, and training and equipping people to carry them out.

In my years of ministry, it has never surprised me to hear that, when people become involved in a ministry, such as Stephen Ministry, being a worship leader, or a food pantry volunteer, their faith in Christ and their love for the Church grows.

Last week, three of our people — Shirley Blankenship, Scott Breiner, and Linda Rihl completed their Pastoral Care Team training to visit our hospitalized and homebound members and to bring them holy communion.

Others will be needed in the weeks and months ahead for ministries that will require your participation, and the spiritual gifts that you bring.

Beloved people of God,
in today's reading, we are shown a new way forward.

We learned about our responsibility for one another, and about God's trust in us to provide, with God's help, for the needs of the community.

We see the miracle that comes when we renounce the message of scarcity, and turn to God in faith, offering what we have, and allowing God to bless and multiply even the smallest of gifts.

AMEN