

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Picnic in the Park

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John the Baptist embodies the last of the great, Old Testament, prophet-like personalities and is the first in the New Testament to herald the Gospel.

As Jesus' cousin, they danced with one another while still in their respective mothers' wombs. Reading between the lines, the affection between Mary and Elizabeth invites us to imagine that they grow up together.

When John baptizes his cousin, before the skies thunder "this is my son," for others to hear, this prophet knows that Jesus is God's son.

His wilderness lifestyle lives out loud. He chooses to wear animal skins before they become fashionable. Without a care for baths, he must smell to high heaven and polite society shuns him. More likely, he lives outside of the ordered polis because he roars at the sordid details of who and what corrupts the community.

The refreshing honesty from this fire and brimstone preacher draws crowds. He calls people to stop living for themselves, change their ways, devote themselves to God and one another. Life in first century Palestine, for the commoner, was

no picnic in the park and John the Baptist gives them a glimpse of heaven, in this life.

The crowds grow. They love him.

Because of all this, the puppet king, Herod fears him.

Herod tries to balance letting John rage in the distance and at the same time, keep John from disrupting his fragile grip on ruling.

During a night of drunken partying, Herod tosses the scales away, and John the Baptist loses.

Herod executes him, not because he heralds Jesus as the Christ and not for preaching a life-sustaining theology. Herod takes off his head as a fee for a young dancers' attention.

As this transpires in Jerusalem, the people of Jesus's hometown scorn him for acting above his lowly status as a carpenter. This "the son of Mary," (hint, hint "illegitimate"), could not possess the insight of a prophet or the intellect of a scholar.

Jesus withdraws from the brutal world of Herod Antipas.

And as today's story begins, he is reeling in grief and shock. If a prophet, as beloved as his cousin, loses his life so quickly, he knows it only foreshadows his own demise.¹

Dear God, we come to you with a hunger, a hunger we often cannot name, or a hunger we doubt can be satisfied. Feed us with your word. Feed us with the bread of life that we learn to trust you and the love revealed by your son, our savior, Amen.

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."

¹ Matthew 14:13-21 - Center for Excellence in Preaching (cepreaching.org)

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.

When faced with such injustice and poverty, deep in our hearts, wouldn't we rather have someone like Superman for Jesus? Someone who will beat up our enemies and punish evildoers. Someone far more feared and respected by those who hurt us than a savior who tells us to turn the other cheek. Someone who gets mad and gets even. We may not seek revenge, but at least we'd like justice.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, we meet the full spectrum of the savior God sends, divine and human.

When Jesus learns of John's death, his whole world stops, just like it does for you and me when we learn of a loved one's death.

Matthew's gospel lets us imagine what it was like when Jesus hears that Herod parades John's head through a dinner party. Does he seethe with rage at another senseless death? The showboating of military power. The injustice. We imagine he and his disciples shed tears as their fear grows. John's life prepared the way for Jesus' ministry and his death likely prepares the way for Jesus' death.

Jesus came to save lives. But now his presence on the planet had cost John his earthly life. It just didn't make sense. As much as Jesus' world stops with that range of human emotions, we know that it keeps turning. Someone needs to care for the headless body. And, someone carries the tragic news to John's mother, Elizabeth, and to Jesus' mother, Mary.

No wonder Jesus wants to be alone.

Given their passion for John, we can imagine the crowds also grieve. So they leave the city to find Jesus, arrive in the wilderness without food or water. They bring their sick, and along the way more fell ill. This mass of people looks more like refugee camp than picnic pavilion.

Then the miracle unfolds. As with every, every feeding miracle in our faith history, from manna falling from the sky upon the early Israelites to vessels of grain never running out, compassion moves God to feed everyone.

This same compassion moves Jesus. The Bible refers to Jesus “having compassion” upon people six times in the New Testament. And, Compassion moves the Good Samaritan to care for the injured stranger. The Prodigal Son’s father feels compassion for his wayward child.

The Greek word literally means to be moved in one’s bowels.

It’s the opposite of “I hate your guts.”

It means “In my deepest gut, I feel love for you.”²

² Jan Edmiston composes searing blog posts at *A Church for Starving Artists*. Wish I had saved the actual date when I put her ideas about compassion rising from the guts in my notes.

Compassion implies being one with someone – which is so much more than feeling sorry for them or identifying with their pain.

We can imagine Jesus as the one with swollen eyes, blotched skin, and tear-stained cheeks. His hands and voice tremble from the sorrow. And yet out of his own emotional trainwreck, in the face of possible death, he responds to the feelings that stir within him to tend those in need.

Our enlightened intellect wants us to deconstruct this miracle, to categorize it into moralistic teaching of sharing. This tendency exposes our hesitancy to place our hope in God, kind of like the disciple's skepticism that their provisions would satisfy the others.

This story invites us to set aside our disbelief about the math of multiplication to believe in the possibilities of compassion from one human being to another, all initiated by God.

Notice how the story unfolds.

Unlike other miracles, no one comments, either affirming or discrediting Jesus' divinity. Jesus doesn't tell a parable to

teach or unpack the mystery. The miracle doesn't begin from some epiphany or newly found faith, nor does it culminate in anyone committing to believe. No one is told to keep quiet and yet no one runs to proclaim this miracle to the world. No one comments about his fame spreading as a result.

It is an inside job. A church story told as a story just held among a family.

Maybe this is why this story, this miracle, is preserved in all four gospels.

Even though each gospel speaks to a unique audience of what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the world, each gospel ensures the early church tells this story of everyone, everyone being accepted and fed.

Scholars believe the followers of Jesus told this story every time they gathered, using the same language, "take, bless, break, and give."

"Take, bless, break and give" describe the way Jesus presides at this meal and at his last supper. Those same four verbs shape our Lord's Supper each time we break the bread.

This miracle, of turning certain death into life, paves the way to believing and claiming the resurrection truth.

Remembering this miracle in taste and community, and meeting people like us and unlike us, is the way God intends for us to live in this world, today. Remembering this miracle invites us to be one of those disciples whom he tells, “you feed them,” trusting in our acts of compassion towards one another, God will provide. Remembering the joy of that first picnic in the park, over and over, at the table, and in our church fellowship and service, gives us a taste of life eternal.

What we share in common is not our individual beliefs. Each week you remind me in myriad ways of what you/we think “inclusion” means, what “welcome” means. We often disagree. We ponder forgiveness and debate about what happens to Jesus and to us when he dies on the cross. Few agree about pledging, tithing, even the nuances of how to distribute communion elements.

The size of this sanctuary only hints at the breadth of beliefs and yet we gather as one body to worship. What we share in common is not our faith. Before anything else, we share our

humanity. In our frail flesh Jesus meets each of us, to tend us, to teach us the saving grace of compassion.

This story teaches us that great churches are not built by yelling about sin or administering some litmus test of holiness or worthiness. Communities become strong churches where broken people gather and find healing, hope and grace. Some say the church began at Pentecost. I submit, the needy crowd that gathers for a picnic gives birth to *the church*.

Even though the task seems daunting of too much anger and violence, too little to share, too much need, I hope that this church persists in tending the outcast and hungry, one person at a time, one meal at a time, ensuring life. It all begins with compassion for one another.



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