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SERMON

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A Deserted Place

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A delivery of bread.

Last week I taught on the parable of the woman who “hid” the yeast in dough. This story inspired one of our dear members to bake some homemade bread, which was a wonderful way to live out the story. This member then decided that it was only right to share some of that great with the pastor who preached the sermon. It just so happened that it was delivered to my house just as I finished up a particularly grueling bike ride, my first one in a while. To say I was cooked would be an understatement! I was so dead, I could barely move from the couch. I was in what you might call a deserted place.

And then, just like that, bread shows up at my doorstep. Not just any bread, either! This was really good bread! The kind that just hits the spot! All of a sudden, in my own deserted place, I was given the gift of bread. So all week I have been pondering how God used last week’s sermon to inspire someone to do something that inspired this week’s sermon. It’s kind of like *Sermon Inception* or something like that!

But still, we hear this familiar story of Jesus feeding five thousand plus people in a deserted place. And I think, just to simplify things, there are three essential truths in this story that are worth our attention this morning. Should this sermon inspire anyone else around here to bake bread and deliver it, my address is...

Truth one: We will all find ourselves in deserted places.

We spend so much time, money, and energy trying to avoid them, but I think it's just a truth of life that we are going to wind up in deserted places from time to time.

Jesus and the disciples are in a deserted place, in many more ways than one. For starters, it is an actually deserted landscape. I have never been to Israel/Palestine, but I'm told that there are some pretty harsh landscapes there. Places where nothing grows, places where there are few resources, places where surviving is difficult. This is where Jesus and his disciples are, and they're there because they've received some distressing news.

Just before this story, Jesus finds out that his friend, his cousin, and his mentor John the Baptist has been killed. John had the audacity to speak truth to power, and power took his life from him.

Which, all personal attachments to John aside, Jesus is doing the exact same thing with his ministry. He's speaking truth to power. He's telling powerful people that the way they're viewing the world is wrong. He's inviting those powerful people to lay down some of that power, for a new way of life. Jesus is intimately aware that those powerful people want to kill him for it. Maybe they even want to crucify him. So, he's lost his mentor and friend, and he's lost that person for doing exactly what he's doing now. Emotionally speaking, I don't

have to work too hard to imagine that this is a deserted place for Jesus to be.

It's a low point in his ministry. Some people assume that when you get Jesus in your life, that everything is great all the time. It's like when you become a Christian, every single week you'll find that phantom \$20 in the laundry. To be sure, there are blessings in the walk of faith. But there are also deserted places. We should be honest about that. But, we also probably shouldn't fear deserted places either.

It turns out that God does great work in the deserted places. Scripture is littered with stories of God working in the wilderness with God's people.

For instance, shortly after the people of Israel were liberated by Charlton Heston...they find themselves wandering in the wilderness, in a deserted place. And while they're out there, they learn some things. They learn that God will provide for them, with quail and manna and water, if they just let God instead of trying to do it all themselves. They learn that God desires their hearts be purely and totally set on God, not on the lifestyle of their neighbors in some comparison game. They learn that if they want to win the battles of life, they'll be farther ahead to let God do the fighting. As we keep reading, there's some doubt about whether or not the people of Israel hang on to these lessons, but still, God for sure does some pretty miraculous things in the deserted places.

Then there's Elijah and the still, small voice. We remember this story, right? He performs a miracle on behalf of God, and as is often the case, it upsets a lot of people. So he's on the run for his life. He finds a place in the wilderness, in a deserted place. While he's there, he comes across howling winds, and earthquakes, and fires. But when all that passes, he's met with the sound of sheer silence...and he knows that God is there. Sometimes, I think God sends us out to deserted places because of the busy-ness of our lives. It becomes too loud for us to hear what God most wants to say to us.

Jesus himself starts his ministry, right after John baptizes him, in his own deserted place. He's tempted, and that's a rich story that we'll have to come back to some other time, because it is certainly a sermon in itself. But, Jesus learns how God will provide, even for God's own son, right there in the deserted places. Jesus at this point is accustomed to them. Deserted places are a part of the life of faith, they're part of the program.

So what should we do when we're in a deserted place? Well for starters, don't panic. Again when we've been told that being a Christian means that everything will always be alright, we can view a deserted place in our lives as a failing of some kind. It's not. It's a training ground. So, please don't panic. God's got you right where God wants you.

But secondly, we can enjoy the silence. Every now and again, sometimes even in the middle of a work day, I just need to turn

off all my electronic devices. Do you know how often these things are trying to get our attention? Constantly. And so sometimes, I might even choose to put myself in a deserted place, trying to get away from notifications by going for a walk, or praying, or going for a bike ride (which, again, if you want to give me bread afterwards, my address is...). Sometimes in deserted places it's ok to just lay back and enjoy the silence, which is so rare in our modern world, isn't it?

And so, we need to keep a watch out, because God does some of God's best work here. Scripture sure seems to suggest that when we're in deserted places, even in a crowd of five thousand plus, we should keep our eyes open. God might be ready to do something magnificent among us.

Truth Two: Christ compassionately responds to our needs.

The text tells us that when Jesus looks out over the crowds, he has compassion for them. There is a great word in the Greek language for us to study today, honestly it may almost be worth the price of admission, this one word alone. The word in Greek for compassion here is *splanknizomai*. Isn't that great? I'm betting at some point, maybe soon, maybe further on down the line, but I'm betting that someone here is going to be at a dinner party wanting to sound impressive.

This word gets translated as compassion, but there's a lot more to it here. It comes from the root word in Greek *splanchnon*, which means your guts, your innards. It means

your very being. So *splanknizomai* is a love, an action that comes from your guts. So as Jesus looks out over this “great crowd,” he had *splanknizomai* for them. Something churned in his stomach, and he needed to do something.

Which is interesting, because think of all the things that Jesus could have said. He could have said “Go get your own bread,” or “that’s not my job,” or “you should have thought of that before you left the house,” or “I help those who help themselves.” But he didn’t say any of that. He had this compassion from deep down, a compassion that moved him to action. Well...sort of. We’ll come back to that.

For now it’s important to recognize that Jesus’ default position is compassion. There are a lot of false-versions of Jesus out there. The vengeful, angry Jesus who’s just waiting for someone to step out of line. The aloof, distant Jesus who is content to let us work things out on our own. The Jesus who kind of “tsk tsk” in the corner at our mistakes. But none of those are the Jesus we’re presented with in Scripture. When Jesus looks at this crowd, and I believe it’s the same when he looks at us, Jesus has *splanknizomai*. He’s moved to compassion, a love that comes from deep down in his guts toward us.

Truth Three: The disciples play a role in this miracle.

Jesus actually doesn’t feed the five thousand. I went back and checked, looking at all the actions Jesus takes in this story. He takes the bread and the fish from the disciples. He organizes

the crowd a little bit, getting everybody to sit down. He blessed the five loaves and the two fish. And then...that's it! After he does those things, he hands the baskets containing the loaves and the fish off to the disciples. They're the ones who distribute. They're the ones who feed. They're the ones who "perform" the miracle, after Jesus' blessing.

A few things to note here: For starters, the disciples participate, even in their own hesitation and doubt. It's not like the disciples were 100% on board with the plan from the beginning. They'd just as soon send the crowds away from the deserted place back to their homes. Let them deal with their own problems. I don't know if they knew what was coming next. I don't exactly know the mechanics of this miracle, that's up to God. I'm guessing that the disciples took those baskets of loaves and fish, and had a "Ok...let's give this a shot" look on their faces.

I wonder...I wonder how far into the miracle it took for their doubts to disappear? I wonder how far into the feeding of this crowd it took for them to trust what Jesus was up to? I wonder how long they had to fake it before they made it?

But the other thing worth paying attention to here is that I think this is how Jesus performs his work today. We all find deserted places, and people in deserted places. One of the great phenomenons of our time is the loneliness epidemic. We have all this social media, all these opportunities for connection, and yet we feel farther and farther apart than

ever. The default position too for our culture seems to be drive the wedge home even further. We drive wedges between ourselves based on our political ideologies. We drive wedges between ourselves based on our racial identities. We drive wedges between ourselves based on our beliefs and plausibility structures. The result is that we keep getting more and more lonely, more and more people in the world are in more and more deserted places.

Irony of all ironies, the Church can be exactly the kind of antidote we need for this situation. We can serve people in deserted places, just like those first disciples in Jesus' time.

And it's important that we remember that Christ is always at work blessing what we need. There is this colossal temptation to be the one creating the miracles, to assume that it's our resources, our time, our talents, our efforts that will make a difference in the world. The truth of the matter is that if it were up to us, we'd be done before we ever got started. What am I against the needs of this world right now?

But when I hand over my meager offerings, even when they feel like little loaves and fishes, I believe that Jesus blesses them. By that I don't think that Jesus makes the bread or the fish any different, by the way. These aren't magic words that Jesus is speaking over these simple things. He's just taking what is ours, and giving it back to God. They're God's loaves and fish. They're God's resources. It's God's time. It's God's efforts through us. It's God's talent. When we offer what we

have to Christ, he can bless it in a way that makes it more powerful than we could ever have done on our own.

Then we, as the disciples of Christ, work to pass along that blessing to others. We take what Christ has blessed, and we charge into the deserted places to bless others. We take the baskets straight from Christ, and we hand them out to any and all as they have need. We visit with refugees, because Christ has blessed our relationship building efforts. We send money to organizations like SHIM and Living Stones and Rise Against Hunger, because Christ has blessed our resources to do good in the world. We partner with our community, to share what we've been given, because Christ has blessed everything we are.

So, perhaps a good question to end with is to ask church, where are your baskets right now? Maybe your baskets are full of blessing, waiting to be distributed to those in deserted places. Maybe your baskets are empty, saying right along with the disciples "We have nothing here." Maybe your baskets are full of leftovers from miracles long ago, and you know we can still share that, right? Maybe your baskets have been hidden away for a long time, unsure of when it's safe to help.

Church, let me encourage you right along with those disciples today. Take up those baskets, the ones that are filled with the blessings Jesus has poured out over us, and let's go have *splanknizomai* for those around us in deserted places. We'll be glad we did.

And so may you not panic when you find yourself in a deserted place, but instead remember that God does the best stuff there. May you always come to see that Christ sees you with nothing but compassion, from a stirring deep in his guts because he loves you. May you remember that we are the distributors of what Christ has blessed, and that we charge into deserted places to help those in need. And may you come back to this place with baskets full of leftovers, the blessings of stories in the wilderness, so that we can go out and do it all again tomorrow.



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