

**Pentecost 9A, Proper 13. August 2, 2020. Matthew 14:13-21.**

God sets a table in the wilderness, where all can come and be filled. I have thought of this passage often the last few months, as we have found ourselves wandering in a strange kind of wilderness, cut off from those habits of certainty that make us feel safe. I have thought about it while I literally tried to set up our common table in an unfamiliar and not-entirely-suitable place. The church lawn is beautiful and cozy, *and* it feels very different from the inside of the church when four of us are sweating through the Eucharistic prayer and the wind is whipping the fair linen into impossible tangles and sending the pages of the Altar Book through a hectic tap dance. I have thought about it more generally as a metaphor for these days, and how the desert isn't always transformed, and we aren't always led out of it as quickly as we'd like, but even when the wilderness is wild and we are stuck in it, God still from time to time provides a banquet.

This banquet in the wilderness, a sacrament of Christ's compassion for the hurting multitude, is comfort and hope for us. But if by comparison it is going to focus and illumine our own lives, we might do well to consider the comparison that Matthew is making with this meal. The boundaries of our reading mask why Jesus is heading off into a deserted place to try to be by himself. The passage immediately before this, that sends Jesus in search of rest and solitude, is a very different kind of banquet—the birthday party the ruler Herod throws for himself that ends with the murder of Jesus' cousin John the Baptist.

Some of you will remember this story. Herod throws himself a birthday party with a bunch of rich guests he wants to impress, while John the Baptist sits in a prison cell in the basement. Herod had arrested John after John had condemned Herod for a sort of incestuous marriage. And at the party, Herod's niece/stepdaughter dances for the guests and Herod is so pleased that he offers her anything she wants and taking a cue from her mother, she asks to have John the Baptist killed. So Herod is grieved, but he's ashamed to break an oath in front of his guests, so he kills John. The last verse before our reading is the disciples of John the Baptist coming to inform Jesus of John's death.

Matthew gives us two very different banquets, back-to-back, in what I think must be a deliberate juxtaposition. First we see the rule that is passing away, in all its vanity, cruelty, pettiness, and selfishness. And then we see the rule of God in its compassion, gentleness, hope, and relentless focus on the well-being of others. It would be hard to find a starker contrast of meals in the New Testament. In his halls of power, surrounded by the wealthy, Herod is unable to abide criticism, he is fearful, lascivious, obsessed with his own standing, and willing to hurt or even kill others to avoid being embarrassed. This is the cruel small world to which Jesus is providing an alternative, and the feeding of the multitude is best understood in opposition to the dinner party that seeks only status and yields only death.

Jesus invites us away from Herod's world and to his banquet in the wilderness. But when we get there, we are not just guests. We are guests and waiters. Jesus tries to escape the crowds after hearing of John's death, but they follow him. And when he sees their need, he is moved by compassion for them and spends all day healing the sick. I'm sure that we are the crowds, with

needs and problems, seeking Jesus' presence and healing. But look at us, also, five months into a pandemic still turning up for online church, still finding new ways to continue the work our faith has committed us to. I think we can say that yes we are among the crowd, but we are also the disciples—and that certainly doesn't diminish our needs.

This exchange between Jesus and the disciples is wonderful. We might balk at the starkness of their initial approach: "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." "These people are hungry, please get rid of them" is depressingly familiar for us, but we hope not to hear it coming from Jesus' closest followers. But if we were to extend to them the grace that we hope others will extend to us, we might see this uninspiring request as an all too recognizable feeling of helplessness in the face of tremendous need. We're in the desert with five loaves and two fish and there are thousands of sick, hungry people in front of us.

We know this feeling, of looking at the needs of the world and the resources we have. Maybe even of knowing the limits of our own courage, virtue, and skill, and seeing that the gap between what we can do and what needs to be done is immeasurable. We, too, face a world in terrible need. Literal hunger would be enough, along with its first cousins poverty and illness. But we can add racial injustice and war and a dying environment and a culture that has given itself over to hatred and lies. The need is far beyond us. And Jesus turns to the disciples and says, "they need not go away; you give them something to eat."

Of course Jesus knew that they hadn't brought a bottomless cafeteria with them. And still he turns to them and says, "you give them something to eat." And after he takes, blesses, and breaks the bread, he gives it to the disciples to distribute so that they do indeed give the multitudes something to eat.

God sets a table in the wilderness, where all can eat and be satisfied. Unlike the table of Herod, the tables of our rulers, it is a meal motivated by compassion and given to those in need. But when we accept Jesus' invitation, we find that we are both guests and waiters at the banquet God throws for the world. Living in the alternative rule Jesus is creating, we find ourselves faced with the impossible needs of the world and the baffling command to meet those needs. We can neither solve these problems nor may we sit them out, as the disciples try to do when they ask Jesus to send the crowds away. Instead, we take what we have and begin to give it away. We give, and we give, and we find that there is a bit more to give than we had realized. We walk into the need with five loaves, two fish, and our prayers. Christians can work on impossible problems because we don't think that we have to solve them ourselves. We just have to give, love bread hope, things that we cannot anyway make, or not to scale. We give what we are given, and miraculously God gives enough. Amen.