

Coming Off the Bench
Matthew 14:13–21
Wake Forest Baptist Church
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Our scripture reading this morning begins abruptly: “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” (v. 13a) What had Jesus heard? The first part of the 14th chapter of Matthew tells the story of Herod’s birthday bash. Earlier, Herod had imprisoned John the Baptist, so as he’s hearing stories about Jesus, he’s feeling like he’s got another John on his hands, another prophet stirring up the people. But he had been afraid to kill John because he was afraid of what the people would do if he did as he was aware of John’s popularity. When it came time for his birthday party, though, his step-daughter’s dancing got the best of him. He promised her anything she wanted, and she, at the urging of her mother, asked Herod to bring her John’s head – on a platter.

This was no doubt some birthday bash. Imagine a lavish banquet spread out in a great dining hall, food of all sorts lining lengths of tables. Those attending - the most prominent and wealthy - probably brought gifts to the king to please him and to stay in his good graces. In his enjoyment of the day, Herod got a bit carried away and had his hand forced regarding John. He had made a promise and needed to keep it to save face with his guests. And into this lavish celebration is introduced the gruesomeness of the Baptist’s head being brought in on a plate.

The text doesn’t tell us how John’s disciples came to be told of the event. Perhaps some of his disciples were actually servants in the king’s house, or maybe servants talked about the birthday party to others and word eventually made its way to John’s people. Once these disciples retrieved the murdered prophet, they made their way to Jesus to let him know what had happened.

Upon learning of John’s murder, Jesus needed to get away, so he withdrew and tried to get away by himself, perhaps to mourn, perhaps to reflect on the fact that he knew he would now be the one garnering the attention of imperial forces. But Jesus had responsibilities to the people near him, because the crowds had followed him, even as he tried to escape for solitude, and they were in need, in need of healing, in need of his compassion. So he forgoes his time alone to treat their illnesses.

While Herod has busily satisfied his own needs, Jesus chooses to take care of the needs of others.

He worked the crowds most of the day, and when it was evening, the disciples come to him and ask him to send the people away. Now we don’t have any indication from the text that the disciples had been actively working with Jesus during that day. Back in

Chapter 10, Jesus seemed to be getting the disciples ready to send out to do work in his name, but in the next chapter, we read that when he finished instructing them, he moved on again to continue teaching. Apparently the disciples were still being taught what it meant to be his followers; they were still listening rather than taking action.

Now here, at the close of another day of watching Jesus minister to the crowds, the disciples are focusing back on themselves. “Hey Jesus, it’s late, and there’s nothing around here to eat; send these folks back to their villages so they can get something to eat.”

When I read gospel accounts, I often envision a somewhat haggard-looking Jesus having to stifle complete exasperation with his disciples. I imagine that he often just put his head in his hands, wondering if these poor disciples would ever make sense of what they were being taught, wondering if they would ever be able to do what he was doing.

So Jesus said to them, “Hey, they don’t need to leave. YOU give them something to eat!” Or, more to the flavor of the Greek: “You – yourselves – give them something to eat.” Then in my mind’s eye I can see looks of incredulity on the disciples’ faces. Because there wasn’t a fast food place around every bend, people who were traveling usually took care to take provisions with them, or to be sure there would be close by friends or relatives who could take them in. The disciples had THEIR food – they admit to having five loaves and two fish – but they either selfishly didn’t want to share, or realistically understood that they didn’t have enough to go around.

Herod has his guests feasting on a lavish banquet. It was beginning to look like Jesus’ guests would have nothing to eat.

This story told in all four gospels, but in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus says the same thing to the disciples: “You – yourselves – give them something to eat.” He’s telling them that they can make something happen, that they have the capacity within themselves even though they don’t have access to the lavish wealth of Herod.

We’re living in a challenging time. Job losses are becoming commonplace. Nearly everyone who had money in savings now has less of it. Other people have dropped more deeply into debt and are facing the loss of their homes and possessions. We’re being reminded of how little we actually manufacture here in the US and how dependent we are on other countries for goods. Oil prices are volatile and we wonder when they may skyrocket again. At the same time, we’re being told that gun sales are at record levels. Crime is also on the increase. It feels naïve to trust ANY institution because we learn more, day after day, about how companies have violated our trust, taking on risky propositions that are impacting us in many painful ways.

What do we say today, in such an uncertain time, when Jesus looks at us and says “You – yourselves – give them something to eat.” Do we, like the disciples, hope that the ones in need will leave us? Do we feel that we have nothing left to give, or that we can’t give enough for it to matter?

It's basketball season, and I'm in hog heaven! Basketball is definitely my favorite sport. I played for about six years competitively, which is probably why my knees pop like bubblewrap sometimes when I climb stairs. I'm a longtime fan of ACC basketball, one of those folks who can remember that our conference was not always the powerhouse it is now, with multiple teams expected to make it to the NCAA tournament each year. I still remember the days when the winner of the ACC tournament was the only team that would go to "the big dance."

Many of my youthful Saturdays were spent watching ACC basketball, and Jim Thacker and Billy Packer were the play by play guys. The games were sponsored by Pilot Life Insurance; do you remember the theme song? "Sail with the pilot, at the wheel, on a ship sturdy from its mast to its keel..." I'll admit, I had to check my memory of the lyrics on the internet, and in doing so found there are a lot of us who remember Pilot Life's sponsorship, though there was one person who remembered the song a bit differently. He thought the words were something like, "Sail with the pirates, all the way..." Apparently Disney has infiltrated his thinking with its Pirates of the Caribbean franchise.

Basketball games can change in tone so quickly. Teams go on runs and put up dozens of points seemingly in a moment. Likewise, a missed basket or dropped pass can be a team's downfall; it's like one bad event brings the whole team down and no one can do anything right. Occasionally when things go south for a team, the coach will send in one or more substitutes. Subs don't usually get a lot of minutes, so when they do make it in, they often arrive with great intensity, desiring to show their value to the team. Instead of deferring to the presumed "stars" of the game, they throw themselves into the fray, sometimes quite literally, chasing down loose balls, harassing the player they've been assigned to guard, taking charges. They do whatever they can for as many minutes as the coach gives them. They don't have the luxury of being tentative, of "waiting for the game to come to them." Heck, they don't even have time to warm up; they've got to give it up, right now, because if not, they'll be back on the bench.

Congregations are of course teams, of a sort. Based on our gifts, we have different positions we may "play" such as teachers, committee members, cooks, flower arrangers, pastors, etc. A true team results when individuals are willing to share their unique gifts with – and for – each other.

Jesus' disciples appear to have been watching him as he healed persons from the crowd that had followed him that day. I would like to think that based on his example, they, too, were working among the crowd, giving of themselves as they were able. But the text doesn't lead me there, at least not the way Matthew records it. Instead, they seemed tentative and stand-offish, not wanting Jesus to put them in the game. Even though he had taught them that they could teach and heal as he could, it didn't seem they were ready to get up off the bench, to pool their individual gifts as part of a ministry team. At the end of the day, instead of getting involved, throwing themselves into the work before them, they wanted to retreat.

This past Sunday evening, at our latest congregational meeting in this transition process, we focused attention on God's abundance by undertaking a process called asset mapping. Having taken stock of our various assets, we made lists of hundreds of gifts that are already at our disposal by looking at personal gifts, physical assets of the church, institutional association, economic assets, etc. But before we began listing assets, we answered the question that should really be at the heart of all we are doing during this process: What is God's will for this congregation?

I put all these items on the paper you see before you this morning because I thought it was important for those who were not able to attend to see the wealth of resources that about 50 of our number came up with. I would invite you to come up after worship to get a closer look at them because the depth and breadth is really quite astounding. I'm sure others of you could provide even more assets.

This was a different sort of exercise because in times of transition, in moments of uncertainty, it's much easier to think about what we don't have, and what we think we need, rather than giving attention to the resources already at hand. By the way, I did remove one of the items; I sensed a lack of seriousness on the part of the person who claimed that one of our assets was Steve Boyd's hair!

In the midst of our congregational transition, and our country's economic trials, we spent time looking at the loaves and fishes we have, right now. Some of you have talked about how surprised you were to see everything we put up, and noted how it made you realize what we can do now without adding any other resources to our bag. And so many of our assets are renewable; we can give and give of them without them being depleted. We can share out of our abundance without exhausting the supplies. Together, we took these assets and developed dozens of possible missions for this church, missions we could act on now without adding one new member to the church roll, or one additional dollar to the collection plate.

Many folks function with a zero sum notion, feeling that if they give to someone else, they have necessarily lost something, or depleted themselves. The creators of asset mapping talk about "open sum" thinking...your gain is my gain is our gain. If you know how to teach, you can teach one student or one hundred without losing your capacity to teach. If you have compassion, you can offer it to one person or one hundred without losing your capacity for compassion. If you are a skilled doctor, or chaplain, you can serve one person or one hundred without your skills being diminished.

"You – yourselves – give them something to eat." It was a command, not a simple request. When we feel threatened, feel we're in crisis, it's easy to pull back, to try and conserve what we do have and feel we can control. Reaching out to others and giving of ourselves feels risky. Will there be enough to go around?

This congregation has answered the question; we have abundant gifts and there's plenty to go around. Sure, we could find things we'd like more of, but we are already experiencing abundance. We have lots of loaves and fishes to work with here, friends!

Jesus took what the disciples already had, and by extending it to others, more abundance was created. People get hung up on the nature of the miracle involved in using five loaves and two fishes to feed 5000+ people, but maybe the real miracle is that he was unafraid to share what he had, secure in the knowledge that by sharing, more would be created. By showing that he was willing to approach a throng with what most would acknowledge was too little to eat, he empowered others in the crowd. Travelers on a journey would have probably tucked away some food for themselves or their family, but not enough for a throng, either. Yet Jesus' offer of his portion encouraged them to share their portions - and the gifts multiplied.

It soon became clear that there were not only enough combined resources to serve everyone, but those resources were so plentiful that there were leftover baskets, filled to overflowing. That the number of those baskets was 12 would have reminded Matthew's primarily Jewish audience of the 12 tribes of Israel, and cued them to remember the abundance God had shown their ancestors as they made their way through the wilderness, feeding them to fullness with daily manna.

Herod sat at a great banquet, surrounded by a crowd of people and all the material things his ruler status afforded. But he worried about what he did not have, what he did not control, and all the bounty at his command seemed worthless. The crowds outside his palace were only of concern to him in that they threatened his complete control.

Jesus, too, was surrounded by a crowd, and while worried about the proceedings around John's death, he put aside his own concerns to serve the people in need. His banquet included five loaves and two fishes, and yet, having shown compassion to the crowd around him, they gave of themselves, too, and a greater feast resulted than any Herod could have imagined.

The command Jesus gave his disciples on that evening is the same one being extended to us: "You – yourselves – give them something to eat." Or, as Jesus said in another setting: "Feed my sheep." Our table is set. Our loaves and fishes are ready to be used.

May God grant us wisdom – and courage – in sharing our banquet with a hurting world. Amen.