

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

In today's gospel passage, we read of Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands with only a few loaves of bread and some fish. As far as Jesus' miracles go, this is probably one of the more famous ones, and for good reason: a version of this story shows up SIX times throughout the New Testament, and it's the only miracle of Jesus' (besides his resurrection) that's recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke, *and* John.

Now, if you're like me, by the time you read or hear a story multiple times, you may begin to tune it out a little bit. Perhaps this even happened to you as we read our story today; maybe your mind started to wander because you already knew what was going to happen. I can relate to this; in fact, this passage felt so familiar to me that when I was re-reading it this week, I almost missed out on an important discovery. I almost missed out on the fact that Matthew's version of this story is not a complete story on its own, but rather the second part of a story about two hosts and two gatherings.

I almost missed it because the gospel text from today's lectionary is missing something. Our gospel passage is Matthew 14, verses 13 through 21, but in our lectionary version, the first half of verse 13 has been left out. What we read today says, "Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." But if you look up that same verse in the Bible, you find a longer sentence, which states that, "**Now when Jesus heard this**, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." It

seems that Jesus didn't just randomly decide he needed some alone time; it was in response to something. Which, of course, begs the question: *What* did Jesus hear, and *why* did he withdraw? This is where the first half of the story—and the first gathering—comes in. Let me give you that context.

The passage right before today's gospel text describes a celebration in honor of King Herod's birthday. One can accurately imagine a party of great decadence and finery. It most likely would have taken place in a palace, with an elaborate banquet, and a long list of elite guests. It seems like Herod was pulling out all the stops, even arranging for entertainment for his guests. As the story goes, Herod's stepdaughter dances for his guests, and he is so pleased by it, that he publicly promises to, "Grant her whatever she might ask."

This is where the story takes a gruesome turn. Herod's stepdaughter confers with her mother and, in an act of vengeance, the two of them request the head of John the Baptist on a platter. For further background, John the Baptist is their enemy and a political prisoner at the time of this event. He was incarcerated by Herod because he spoke out against Herod's greedy and immoral behavior, which also implicated Herod's new wife. And although Herod doesn't want to fulfill this bloody request, we read that, "Out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given." And so the final snapshot of this great banquet is of John's head being brought out on a platter, and of John's disciples taking and

burying his body and telling Jesus about it.

Although the story of Herod's feast ends there, we can make our own assumptions about how guests might have felt leaving the palace. Perhaps once so excited to receive an invitation to such a grandiose gathering, we can imagine them leaving feeling appalled, fearful, and disgusted. A banquet that seemed to promise pleasure and abundance ends with violence and desolation.

This could not be any more different than what we see in the second half of the story, with the banquet Jesus ends up hosting—and that is exactly the point. From the very beginning of this second act of the story, there is a sharp contrast between Herod's banquet and Jesus' meal.

Whereas the first part of the story starts with a birthday celebration planned for a wealthy king, the second part starts with Jesus' grief and isolation. Jesus has received news of John's death, and we read that he withdraws to a "deserted" place all by himself. Another way to translate the phrase "deserted place," would be, "wilderness," or "wastelands," or "ruins." In other words, there is nothing ornate or abundant about Jesus' setting.

Additionally, instead of being surrounded by a handpicked cohort of VIPs, Jesus' company shows up uninvited. The crowd who seeks him out consists of the sick and the poor, of folks desperate enough to follow Jesus by foot into the wilderness. The fact that the only food to be found in their midst is a few barley

loaves and fish only confirms their lowly status: this was the food of the poor at that time. At face value, this scene could not be more different than the scene at Herod's table, but we'll learn that is a good thing, because the two feasts end very differently.

The motivating force at the royal banquet is Herod's desire for approval and his need to save face. Alternatively, the motivating force for Jesus at his meal is compassion for the people around him. Although Jesus initially wanted to be alone, when he sees those who have followed him, he is moved to heal and feed them. Whereas Herod's guests leave having witnessed a cruel and needless death, Jesus' guests leave having been healed, blessed, and fed. The contrast between the two hosts and their two realms could not be clearer: Herod's kingdom of man prioritizes wealth, power, and ego, which leads to violence and decay; while Jesus' kingdom of heaven does the inverse: it breaks into desolation and ruin to bring about healing and nourishment.

This two-part story about the two feasts is the perfect culmination of our gospel texts from the past three Sundays, all of which have contained parables about what the kingdom of heaven is like. Over the past few weeks, we've read that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, or yeast, or treasure hidden in a field. Again and again, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as breaking forth into the ordinary and the mundane; again and again the kingdom of heaven shows

up where it is least expected. Today's story turns these parables into reality for those following Jesus: the kingdom of heaven is like five loaves and two fish for a crowd of hungry people; the food seems humble and sparse, but when blessed, broken, and passed out, it feeds five thousand with dozens of baskets leftover. The kingdom of heaven breaks into desolate and deserted places to offer healing and nourishment.

Let me repeat that: The kingdom of heaven breaks into desolate and deserted places to offer healing and nourishment. I find this to be really good news, because when I look out at our world, I see a lot of desolate and deserted places. I see individuals who are lonely and in pain and self-medicating; I see communities ravaged by xenophobia, racism, and classism; and I see an environment decimated by consumerist extraction and pollution.

When we see all of this, we may be tempted to despair. We may feel immobilized by what we see, labeling it a wasteland beyond hope of transformation. But I think we do this because we've accepted the terms and conditions of the kingdom of man. We—like King Herod and his dinner guests—expect salvation to be found where things look neat and shiny; we expect the way out of our mess to be found through wealth and power; to be figured out in immaculate board rooms or fancy banquet halls or in the classrooms of prestigious universities. And sure; we shouldn't discount political or philanthropic efforts or

education; but this is not where the kingdom of heaven does its most transformative work.

No, it is where we are most hungry, most desperate, and most filled with grief, that the kingdom of heaven breaks in. This scene of Jesus grieving in a deserted place and yet feeding thousands of hungry people reminds us of this. And various other stories throughout the history of the church remind us of this too: Paul writing letters of encouragement and praise from a jail cell; the early church growing and thriving despite persecution; Christian protesters marching and singing hymns in the face of hatred during the Civil Rights movement; the stories are too many to count. Perhaps even we are part of such a story; worshiping in the simplicity of a parish hall where we're collecting oil for our neighbors who are scared to leave their houses for fear of being taken away from their homes and families. It is here, in these places that seem so barren and deserted, that Jesus promises to show up and feed us, and to sustain us in the work of healing and nourishing others.

In response to this truth, we must stop ourselves from looking away from places that seem deserted or desolate. In the face of hard truths and painful realities, our urge might be to run away or to escape; to ignore systems that benefit us while harming others, to numb ourselves with any & every comfort and sedative sold to us in the kingdom of man. But if we do this, we will miss out on the healing

Jesus has in store for us and others and the miraculous bread he has given to sustain us.

In just a few minutes, we will come to another miraculous table that Jesus has prepared for us. As we get ready to participate in this meal, I urge you to consider where in your life or in the world you most desire the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven. And I pray that as you take the bread and the wine, you would trust that Jesus will show up and sustain you in these seemingly deserted places, and that he will lead you and all of God's people into healing and wholeness.

Amen.