Pentecost 9 Proper 13

August 6, 2017

Matthew 14:13-21

In the Gospels, we hear a few times about Jesus going off by himself, usually to pray.

It’s easy to understand why Jesus needed to get away on occasion. He was always surrounded by so many people. And as much as he loved them, as much as he enjoyed their company, even the Son of God needed time to get away, to recharge. He needed time to pray, to work through whatever was on his mind, to reconnect with his Father.

Our Gospel text today tells us of one of those times. But this time was different, because this time what prompted Jesus to take some time away from his ministry was his grief. His cousin John had been killed. Along with needing rest, Jesus needed time to mourn, time alone to deal with his grief, to take care of himself so he could help others deal with their own grief, so he could better tend to their needs.

So Jesus slipped off to a deserted place. But when the people heard that he’d gone away, thousands of people followed him, seeking comfort and healing.

Jesus’ heart was full of compassion for them and he tended to them. He cured those who were sick.

Eventually, somebody realized that it was getting late. And, since there was no Safeway nearby, the disciples began to worry about what they were going to do with all these people, people who would soon need to be fed.

The disciples became anxious. When they looked at the crowd, all they saw was a problem. The only response they could think of, the only thing that made sense to them, was to go to Jesus and say, “It’s getting late. Send the people away so they can go to the villages to get food.”

We often become anxious in the face of problems that are caused by a perception that resources are limited. Our instinct for self-preservation narrows our thinking. We’ve seen that happen over the last few months, with people buying far more than they needed of certain items out of fear that they *might* be in short supply, causing the shortage they feared.

Perhaps one of the disciples had checked and saw what they had – 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish – and did the math. It might feed Jesus and the 12 disciples, but surely no more than that.

Their self-preservation said, “Send everyone else away, and we’ll eat our food in private when they’ve gone.”

Notice what they **didn’t** do. They didn’t ask people in the crowd if they had any food to share. They don’t try to come up with any ideas. They simply tell Jesus to send the people away.

Jesus’ response is simple: “They need not go away. You give them something to eat.”

Let me pause our story here for a moment. Some years ago, there was a TV show called *Joan of Arcadia.* It featured a teenage girl, Joan, who began to be visited by God. God would appear in various manifestations – a kindly grandmother, or a cute guy, or a no-nonsense cafeteria lady – depending on the situation, and give Joan tasks to do. God didn’t provide instructions for how to carry them out, leaving that to Joan to figure out.

In one episode, Joan is told to volunteer at a school art show, something she reluctantly does. God then tells her to see to it that a piece of art created by a boy she likes doesn’t appear in the show. Again, no instructions on how to pull this off. Joan tries to persuade him to remove the piece, but he declines, and it eventually sells for $500. The boy decides that he’s going to drop out of school and focus on his art full-time.

Joan realizes that this, of course, is why God did not want the piece of art in the show. Feeling as if there is no alternative, she slips into the show and destroys the work of art.

When she is caught, the boy tells Joan he’ll stay in school, but their friendship is over. In her next conversation with God, Joan, frustrated and devastated, yells at God. She tried talking him out of it, tried buying it, tried stealing it. “What else is there?” she demands. “You wanted me to smash it?”

God’s beautiful response is, “Don't blame me for your failure of imagination. What you have to ask yourself is, what are you going to do now? Every new decision is another chance to do the right thing.”

Faced with a new decision, the disciples only saw one solution – turn everyone away. They had a failure of imagination.

Anxiety does that to us. It limits our thinking. It allows our fears to tell us the only real solution is to focus inward, protect ourselves, and wait till things get better.

So when the disciples have their failure of imagination, Jesus says of the bread and fish, “Bring them to me.”

And in words that echo the Last Supper, Jesus takes the bread and fish, he looks up to heaven, blesses and breaks the loaves, and gives them to the disciples, and the disciples give them to the crowds.

God is an expert at working with what seems like nothing, or with very little, and doing amazing things. The creation story tells of God forming order out of chaos. The Israelites, wandering the desert, were sent manna and quail. Thousands ate a meal of bread and fish and all who ate were filled, with an abundance left over.

God has a habit of providing for our needs, but it’s up to us to be creative and to make sure that our anxiety and our fears don’t lead us to a failure of imagination, to focusing inwardly, and neglecting to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We are not called – as individuals or a congregation – to help everyone, to solve every problem, to right every wrong. But we are called to lives of what St. Paul calls believing obedience, obedience of faith, to take what we have -- what God has given us – and prayerfully share with others.

What seems like a little to each of us, when combined with what others bring, becomes something much bigger.

Anxiety leads us to failures of imagination. It turns our focus inward and allows us to dwell on our fears.

But over and over in the Bible we hear the words “be not afraid.” Be strong in faith. Trust in God. Trust that God will provide, not just a little, but an abundance.

We are called together as a community of faith, working together, using our collective talents and imagination, to share God’s love with all of God’s creation, trusting in the words of St. Paul, that God’s grace is sufficient, and his power is made perfect in our weakness.

Every new decision is a chance to do the right thing. Every new decision is a chance to demonstrate our faithful obedience to God. Every new decision is a chance to serve Christ, to follow his example, and to serve as witnesses to God’s extravagant, abundant love.

May God bless us with the courage, wisdom, and imagination to move beyond our anxiety and into trust and compassion toward our neighbor. Amen.