

Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost

It is said that confession is good for the soul. So, I must confess that I did not write a sermon for today. Today, I would like to present a sermon by Rev. Mark A. Rouland, senior pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, St. Charles, Missouri. In researching for this Sunday, I found this sermon based on Matthew 14:13-21 which, I believe, leads us to a unique perspective on the Feeding of the Five Thousand. In the section of Matthew¹ just before this, Jesus was teaching and spoke in many parables. And at this time, Jesus' cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, has been beheaded by Herod². With that setting, the following is Pastor Rouland's sermon:

Miraculous and Simple³

Coming out of seven consecutive Sundays in which the Gospel lesson from Matthew has us listening to Jesus, in today's Gospel, Matthew shifts to watching Jesus.

In both this reading and the next, there is an unusual balance by which Jesus is Lord, capable of doing miraculous things, but also needs to spend time alone with God in prayer.

There are times when we gather here mostly to listen to Jesus. And that's good. I'm a big fan of listening to Jesus, and we could never have too much of that. Listening to Jesus. But today I want you to watch Jesus, to watch while you listen. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and, well, if the picture is of Jesus, maybe it's a million words. Maybe a better way of saying all that

¹ Matthew 13

² Matthew 14:1-12

³ Concordia Pulpit Resources • Volume 30, Part 3, Series A; Rev. Mark A. Rouland, senior pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, St. Charles, Missouri

would be this: Often, when you and I speak back and forth, I say, "This is the Word of the Lord;" and you say, "Thanks be to God." But maybe sometime you could reply, "These are the works of the Lord," and I'd think you were on to something. Words and works are all the same with Jesus. So today let's listen, but while we listen, let's watch, too, and see what the picture is worth. Jesus has been teaching much, and many have heard. [In the parables, we have heard about] Sowers. Seeds. Nets. Treasures. And on and on. The text now shifts from listening to watching. Jesus begins to work miracles. Watch him.

1. Jesus reacts to news about John the Baptist.

Matthew opens this section by showing us the reaction of Jesus to some pretty terrible news. Maybe you can see the face of Jesus sigh and watch his head drop a bit and his shoulders sag ever so slightly. If you had been close enough to see, but not close enough to hear, you would have known that the news was bad just by seeing the posture of Jesus change. He is a man who often carries heavy burdens, but no matter how accustomed Jesus has become to hearing bad news, he is not calloused, and bad news strikes him like it strikes you and me.

Jesus hears that John the Baptist --- you know, no one greater, the Elijah who is to come, the sight to be seen in the desert, the baby jumping in the womb, that one --- he's dead. He was killed, [beheaded by Herod]. John the Baptist is dead. And Jesus is upset, and his body shows it. We don't hear what he said, if he said anything, but we do see what he needs: we see him walk away to spend a little time by himself, alone. Well, alone enough, because, of course, we know Jesus is never really alone, just as we're never really alone, because God is with us to sustain us both wherever we go. So, Jesus walks away with head hung low and a weight on the shoulders, and he doesn't stop to teach us a

lesson or whisper some insight. But we do see, as he walks away, that it is definitely okay --- and more than okay --- sometimes to drop everything to spend a little time leaning on God, especially when the weight on your shoulders seems too heavy to bear alone. See Jesus pray.

2. Jesus sees the crowd.

The next time we see Jesus, he sees the crowd gathering around him. I'm not sure how long he actually got to spend in prayer, but I'm sure it didn't feel like enough. Is it ever enough?

A crowd has gathered, a great crowd really, five thousand people at least, depending on how you count. I'm not exactly sure why they're there, why they're here again. They might be there because they heard about the Baptist, and they had to find their place of refuge to think things through, and for them that was near Jesus. I don't know. Could be. They might be there to hear teaching like they have before, because Jesus has just finished that long section of teaching, and maybe they've come back for more. It could be that they're here because they want Jesus to heal them, or lead them. I don't know exactly why they're here, but they are, and you can imagine the sight. Can you see five-thousand-plus people gathering in the wilderness and trying to get closer to Jesus? No stadium seating, no microphones, but they are there. What a logistical mess! Had I been Jesus, I might have stayed hidden and hoped the ushers take care of it while I "prayed".

Jesus, though, accepts this interruption and steps from his boat into a sea of humanity. He shows much compassion on the crowd that's gathered around, and we see him start to heal the sick that are among them. How do you picture Jesus healing the sick? Do you picture him running through the crowd, or do you see them hobbling up to him? I don't know. But I do see him setting aside

his weight and burdens, even though they were great, in order to carry the burdens of this enormous crowd. His needs were great. He needed time to spend in prayer and devotion and reflection and sadness.

But he drops it all, and we see him taking care of others, holding their hands and removing their bandages and clutching their eyes and ears. You can even see the people who find healing in him jumping away and shouting praises. What does the face of a person who's caring for thousands look like? I've seen hosts work frantically with what seemed like eight hands and arms just to take care of ten on Thanksgiving, but five thousand with physical and emotional injuries and scars? How can you do that? How fast would he have had to move? Certainly, I couldn't stop and hear each of their stories, not even for a moment, but that would seem so unlike Jesus. Did time slow down, or did he speed up? Who knows for sure? But it is an amazing picture, an ordinary-looking man, whom we of course know to be, the extraordinary Son of God --- healing and caring for a massive gathering of people. See him heal.

3. The disciples show concerns of their own.

Obviously, Jesus isn't the only person to notice this outrageous crowd and their overwhelming needs. Matthew shows us now the perplexed faces of the disciples of Jesus as they try to problem-solve without him. You can picture them:

Jesus' disciples, always insightful (?), always perceptive (?), huddling together with furrowed brows and teeth cutting into their bottom lips as they try to crunch and re-crunch the numbers, but it never works. The disciples saw that the day was dragging on and the sun was lower in the sky. They saw a couple people in the crowd rub their stomachs because dinner time was here and there wasn't anything around. They saw the needs of the people, and they saw their

own inability to care for them properly. Finally, one of the disciples, who was either the brave one or just the one to draw the short straw, comes up to Jesus and says, "Jesus, we happened to notice that there are an awful lot of people out here, and you may not have noticed, but we have noticed, that they really didn't seem to remember to bring dinner, and there isn't a Golden Corral for miles, no one brought their Costco card, and we are outside the radius of every pizza delivery joint in the area, so we just don't know how to feed these people. You gotta send them home. Please, Jesus, send this problem away."

I picture Jesus as being still busy at work, healing the sick. He doesn't even have to look over his shoulder to see the faces of his disciples when he says, "Don't send them home. Don't send them away. Feed them." "Well, Jesus, I just don't think you're fully grasping the difficulty of this situation. You can flip the calculator any direction you want; the numbers don't lie. We only have five small loaves of pita bread and two meager fish, and really, Jesus, we were kind of hoping to have some alone time with you." [If you were in their shoes,] Can you blame them? I can't.

4. Jesus breaks bread.

Then Jesus stood up and took the bread and broke it and gave it. Get it? He took bread and broke it and gave it to them, saying Jesus had settled the crowd, had them sit, and then he held this humble loaf up toward heaven, said a blessing, and broke the bread and sent crumbs scattering. Then gave it. And would you believe? --- everyone ate to his or her satisfaction, and the disciples even gathered more than they started with. Miraculous! What do you think the people who were gathered there thought? What did they see? Did they know that a miracle had just occurred --- a miracle that would be passed down for thousands of years? Did they know that in this moment they were getting

just a brief glimpse of the reign of God? Did they know that what they were experiencing at that moment was the closest thing they had ever seen to a little taste of heaven? Do you see it?

The meal itself seems mundane; not fresh baked bread and Beluga caviar, just bread and fish. But it is an actual glimpse of the reign of God breaking in, and it gives us just a little glimpse of heaven, where the feast is always enough and more than enough because Jesus is there. Jesus changes everything. He smashes the disciples' best efforts at multiplication and the cynics' best efforts at explanation. He changes the rules of the natural order of things when he feeds five thousand with meager supplies. And he gives us a little glimpse of heaven to carry us through. What a picture! See him provide! See him pray and break and give and feed thousands. Simple, but miraculous. What a sight!

5. Jesus is working in your life.

What then have you seen? Well, maybe you've seen Jesus' face fall under the weight of mourning loss. You've seen his face lifted as he works all hours of the day healing. You've seen his face pointed toward heaven as his bread feeds thousands.

Now, I want you to picture his face in your life. Where have you seen him working through simple things, offering you a glimpse at the kingdom? Because he is; I promise he is. Have you seen it through the simple but kind words of holy comfort spoken by a loved one at the right time? Is it in the memory of when he claimed you here [in baptism], with water and word? Is it in the small meal of a little bread and a little wine that is given to you for forgiveness, for life, for salvation? In this life, you and I need all of those moments when God feeds us and nourishes us and forgives us, because this life is filled with the pain of death that we can't bear and diseases that we can't

understand and heartache and hunger that we can't overcome alone. But the promise of Jesus is that we aren't alone, even when we step away to catch our breath. Because the Jesus who was crucified for our sins --- he looked so ordinary hanging there --- died with the promise that he would conquer death, and in his resurrection, we have just a little glimpse of what new life in him looks like today, and forever, in the Father's house. Hanging on the cross, alone, arms spread in giving, eyes pointed heavenward praying, carrying the weight of all, laying himself down to take your burden up. See him die for you.

Until that day when we celebrate the feast of always enough, we gather around the simple places where Jesus promises to feed us, with enough to carry us through in simple things like his word and promise. See him work again and again. See him in wafer, wine, and water.

Amen.

JESUS PROVIDED WITH SIMPLE MEANS AND MIRACULOUS WAYS AND STILL PROVIDES TODAY.