

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 6, 2023
“Taking the Initiative” (Matthew 14:13-21)

Today, we hear one of the great miracle stories of Jesus. In fact, it is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four gospel accounts. It obviously held – and still holds – much significance for those who follow Christ. So, this morning I want us to take a closer look at this story and how it still speaks to us.

The story begins with Jesus attempting to withdraw to a deserted place to spend some time alone. I’m sure this is a need that resonates with all of us. There are times when we, too, just want to get away from everything and everybody. It may be a time when we are physically exhausted, a time when we are grieving a loss in our lives, or when we just need some time to talk with God. Such alone time is needed and welcomed.

According to Matthew, Jesus’ decision to withdraw is made after he hears of John the Baptist’s death. And this, of course, is a very natural and human response. Jesus is grieving the death of his cousin. Furthermore, John’s death is an indicator of what is in store for Jesus himself. With the cross looming closer and closer, Jesus needs to prepare himself for the rest of his ministry. And time away will help him do that.

In addition, he is, no doubt, physically exhausted. Large crowds constantly surround him to hear his teachings and be touched by his healing hand. There is little time for rest. And he is emotionally exhausted. Tending to the crowds, his own impending death, and now the news of John’s death have all taken their toll. Jesus needs to get away; to spend some time alone with his heavenly Father so that he might be renewed and re-energized. He needs to spend some time with God before he spends more time with people.

Because some of his disciples are fishermen, Jesus has access to a fishing boat. He gets in the boat and sets sail across the Sea of Galilee to a deserted spot on the opposite shore – a place where there will be no one making demands, a place where he can get his much-needed rest. But that is not to be. Matthew tells us that, when the people figure out where he is headed, a large crowd walks around the lake and arrives at the other side before Jesus.

When Jesus steps out onto the shore of this deserted place, a place of anticipated peace and rest, there is a sea of people waiting for him – 5,000 men plus women and children. Among them are the poor, the hungry, the sick, the sinful, the sorrowful, the hopeless – so many with hurts and needs and pain, eagerly seeking what Jesus can give.

And what Jesus does when he finds this waiting multitude tells us a lot about his character. Rather than ignoring them, or dismissing them, or retreating in the boat, he has compassion for them and heals their sick. Even when he needs rest and wants to be alone, he has compassion for them. Jesus doesn’t see the demanding crowd as a nuisance; nor does he see them as invaders of his privacy. Rather, he sees them as children of God who are suffering or are in need. And he takes the time he has scheduled for himself to be with them and care for them.

Giving freely of himself, he demonstrates how much God cares for them. And the good news for you and me this morning is that just as Jesus responds to these people lovingly and compassionately, he responds to us in the same manner. When we are suffering, we should remember that Jesus hurts with us and shares our pain. He is our friend, as the familiar hymn goes, in good times and in bad.

But knowing that Jesus, out of his abounding love, has made himself available to us, how do you and I respond? Do we respond by following his example, showing the same compassion to others? Or do we stick our heads in the sand and ignore that there are people out there in need? Showing compassion often times requires being active, rather than passive. Jesus doesn't just listen to the folks in the crowd talk about their suffering and nod sympathetically. Rather, out of love, he responds with action. He takes the initiative and heals them.

But how many times is our response more passive than active? Do we take the time to visit that sick neighbor or shut-in, or do we assume that other friends and neighbors will make the visit? Do we respond out of our wealth and resources to provide assistance to our brothers and sisters in Christ who have experienced some bad breaks or misfortune? Or do we assume they will get the help they need somewhere else?

Jesus never assumes anything and he never finds any person to be a nuisance or a bother. From the depths of his being, he gives of himself and responds in a manner that is indicative of how God responds. He responds actively, out of love. He invests himself and his time in the service of the people God loves. And, as his followers, we should respond in the same way. Even in the busyness of our lives – when it is difficult for us to find time to be alone – we should ever let the needs of another person be an inconvenience or an imposition. We should respond to them and their situation out of love and compassion, just as Christ does.

The hours pass and darkness soon envelopes the crowd. The disciples, beginning to worry, came to Jesus and said, *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.* The disciples' response to these people in need of food is much like our response at times. Instead of taking the initiative – the active role – and saying, *WE must do something about feeding all these people*, they basically take a passive role and turn the problem over to Jesus: *These people are hungry, Lord; send them away!*

But imagine their surprise when Jesus turns the table on them. *They need not go away*, he says, *YOU give them something to eat.* The disciples can't believe their ears: *But we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.* They try to impress upon Jesus that what they have is such an insignificant amount of food – in fact, practically nothing – when considering the number of mouths to feed. But with what little they have, they bring to Jesus, and he performs his miracle.

Acknowledging that all things are gifts from God, and recognizing the value in something as insignificant as five loaves and two fish, Jesus blesses and breaks the loaves, and his disciples distribute them among the people. And we know well the rest of the story: *all ate and were filled.*

This miracle gives you and me two snapshots – two little pictures – of our place as disciples in the work of Christ. The first show us that Jesus works through people – people like you and me – to enter the lives of others, just as he works through the hands of the twelve in feeding that five thousand-plus crowd. Every day as we look around, we can see a caring, compassionate Christ. He appears in the face of the friend who listens and holds our hands when we are hurting. We see him in the doctor or nurse who compassionately cares for our dying loved ones; in the teacher who encourages her students to do their best; and even in the neighbor who shares vegetables from her garden. Each and every day we are receiving gifts from Christ through the gifts of those around us. And every day, we have opportunities to give our gifts to Christ by giving to other people.

Yet many times, we, like the disciples, come with what we consider to be very little or nothing. How could what we have to offer possibly help when the need is so great? But it doesn't matter what we bring because, in the hands of Christ, even a little is a lot. With Christ, it is more than enough. Jesus calls to each of us: *Come to me as you are, no matter how poorly equipped; bring to me what you have, however little; and I will use it greatly in my service.* You see, Jesus is not interested in our ability or inability; he is interested in our availability. He wants us to take the initiative and make ourselves – and what we have – available for his use. And when we do, the contribution will be more than enough. Whether it be time, talent, or treasure, Jesus can multiply and use whatever we give him.

The second snapshot of our role in Christ's work is that we are to feed the hungry. Everywhere we turn, people are hungry, not only for food, but for friendship, for understanding, for compassion, for encouragement and a word of hope. As disciples, we are called to take the initiative and satisfy their needs; and to do it with the same love and compassion that Jesus first shows us. Sure, it might be inconvenient, and it may impose a hardship for us, but we need to consider the cross. Hanging there on that crude and torturous instrument of death was, no doubt, inconvenient for Christ. It was, without a doubt, a hardship. But he took the initiative for redeeming us and submitted himself to that cross. Out of love and compassion, he gave himself as the bread of life.

Today, he takes the initiative again by coming to us in his holy meal – pouring out his grace upon us, forgiving our sins, and strengthening us for our journey in the world. My friends, we serve an active God. May we, in turn, take the initiative and be an active influence in the world. Amen.