

Pentecost 10A (Proper 13)

Matthew 14:13-21

August 6, 2023

There are times in the Gospel where we mostly listen to Jesus speak. That's the way it has been in the first 10 Sundays of the season of Pentecost. And that's good. Could we ever do that too much? Of course not! But today, as we are listening to the words of the Lord, we are also watching the works of the Lord. The words and works of Jesus go together. Today the focus of the gospel shifts a bit. We go from hearing of seeds and soil, wheat and weeds, treasure, pearl and dragnet to watching Jesus miraculously provide for the needs of a great multitude. And as we glimpse the pictures of Jesus in today's gospel, the Lord leads Christians like you to trust him to provide.

At the beginning of today's gospel, St. Matthew records that Jesus had just heard the terribly devastating news that his relative, his forerunner, John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. "When Jesus heard what had happened..." Those words held a handful of horror in them. What was going through his heart and the hearts of his disciples? Just look at Jesus now. You see a man sorrows. You view one familiar with suffering. You seem him withdraw from the public to be alone with his disciples. Jesus needed this time with his disciples and the disciples need this time with their Savior. The disciples needed to come to the realization that even in this tragedy, where it seemed God had failed to provide, that indeed God would be glorified in this.

Jesus was at the height of his popularity in the area of Capernaum and it didn't take long for the crowds to find out where Jesus had gone and began flocking to him. Some make the effort to hear him. Others want to be healed by him. Whatever the reason, people ran to get the place where the boat Jesus was in would run ashore. Just look at the crowds. People pushing forward to hear him, to touch him, to be healed by him. Just look at Jesus. He gazes with compassion of the crowds and his heart goes out to them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The compassionate Son of God began to teach them many things. Jesus began healing those who were ill. Just look at Jesus. This man of sorrows, this man familiar with suffering, this ordinary looking man speaking heavenly truths and bringing miraculous healing.

Let's turn our focus now to another telling picture. Set your eyes on the disciples of Jesus. The disciples saw the throng of people and saw all of the problems involved. They know the people haven't eaten. They are well aware that the time is slipping away. They could estimate how many months' wages it would take to buy food for all the people. They knew the meager resources on hand. They had the math right. They hit the nail on the head with the logistics. They didn't fail in that, but in their faith. They didn't understand what kind of Lord they had in Jesus. Can you just hear them whispering in the background while Jesus is teaching? "This is all well and good but it is getting late. Jesus is apparently so wrapped up in what he is doing that he hasn't noticed the time. We had better tell him it is time to say "Amen." How much of Jesus' divine teaching had they missed because they were so busy stewing over the problem near at hand? Perhaps if they had listened more and fretted less they would have realized Jesus knew what he was doing. It's always better to be listening when Jesus is speaking. The pressing problem finally led to the disciples trying to give Jesus advice. Listen. ***When evening came, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place and the hour is already late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves."***

What we see next in Jesus' answer to their advice is masterful. ***But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."*** If they think that they are so smart that they can advise him, well, then let them figure out a better solution than the inadequate one they offered; for their solution is truly no solution at all. There is no ready access to food nearby. Small farms in the area will not have enough food for this crowd. There are no villages in the area that would be able to supply food for so many at this hour. The need, the problem is getting quite serious. What will happen once the hunger of the crowd really sets in? Everything seems helpless and hopeless.

Jesus handing the problem over to the disciples is his way of letting them know again and in this new setting that he is always Master. It is just another way of teaching them that they are always in need, with needs only he can provide. He starts this new lesson by giving the disciples an impossible assignment. He tells them to feed the crowd. Not only do they not have enough money to buy the food for the people; there is no place they could have purchased the supplies. Jesus commands the impossible from them! That's what he always does. This is just another way of demonstrating the absolute need all humanity has. Jesus is using this as an opportunity to teach again that a Christian trusts God to provide.

With the realization that they were completely unable to carry out the impossible assignment Jesus had given them, Jesus asked the disciples how many loaves they had. They answered that they had five loaves and two fish, little more than a snack for two people at most. That's really nothing compared to the need.

Moved by the great need of the crowd and moved by need to bolster the faith of the disciples, Jesus said, "Bring them here to me." Jesus goes into action. Had he started feeding only those closest to him, a riot would have broken out and so he has the people sit in orderly groups of 50 to 100 people. Then Jesus prayed. He said grace. Just look at Jesus now. He who is the provider of everything looks up to his heavenly Father and says in effect, "Thank you." There is no panic. There is no rush. There is nothing more important in the moment.

The next picture you see of Jesus is full of his grace and his power as the Son of God. He turns to those disciples who failed the test of faith he had given them and he uses them as his instruments to distribute the food he had miraculously made. He breaks and then keeps on breaking. He hands fish and keeps on handing fish. With divine simplicity the evangelists record the event. ***They all ate and were filled. They picked up twelve basketfuls of what was left over from the broken pieces. Those who ate were about five thousand men, not even counting women and children.***

The disciples had been worried about finding just enough for everyone to hold them over until they went home. Just look! Everyone at their fill and there were 12 baskets left over. Jesus is still teaching his disciples and us! His kingdom is not one of just enough but where our cup runs over. It wasn't that Jesus overestimated in his multiplication or underestimated the crowd's consumption. He didn't allow a 10% overage for breakage and spoilage. There were exactly 12 baskets of leftovers because this miracle was meant for the disciples to take to heart the truth that God provides regardless of our circumstances.

As you looked at the events of the miraculous feeding today, did you find yourself relating to the disciples? By that, I mean specifically when outward circumstances seem to scatter the promises of God to provide? What circumstances are there that would tempt you to think that God doesn't care? What is happening right now in your life that tempts you to doubt God will provide? Are there certain scenarios where you are led to trust in your own know-how or ability rather than God? Do we ever treat God as someone we can fall back on if we can't get it done ourselves? What problem or worry creeps up that distracts you from the words and promises of Jesus? What does it say of our faith when worry or doubt lead us to abandon the promises of God? If you had been in the place of the disciples, would you have acted any differently than they did?

The words and works of Jesus are specifically for you. As Jesus provided generously for the crowd and for the disciples so he has and will for you. Yes, when tragedy or conflict affects us, we may wonder if God continues to care and provide for us. When Elijah's call to repentance came with the promised famine, it affected Elijah just as much as anyone else in Israel. God's plan for his preservation must have sounded less than ideal, but the Lord still fed his prophet. When our circumstances make us doubt whether God still cares for us, Paul points us to the spiritual blessings God has given us. You are chosen, predestined and adopted as sons and heirs. If we look at the spiritual blessings God provides to us, how could we doubt that he will provide for us physically? Will he not also graciously give us all things? And yet with Jesus there is always more! The Savior who knew all of times you would sin by trusting other people or things to provide rather than him...that same Savior died and rose for you to forgive your sins and grant you heaven. And having accomplished the great work of your salvation will surely not neglect the ones he has purchased with his own blood. Amen.