

I've only been preaching as an ordained pastor for about two and a half years. While I was in seminary, and during the time between seminary and being called as your pastor, I gave a sermon at most every 4-6 weeks. And yet, I have preached on this story multiple times. The story about the feeding of the multitudes comes up relatively frequently in the lectionary cycle since it is mentioned in all four Gospel accounts. In fact it is the only miracle story that takes place before the resurrection that is included in all four gospels. Two years ago I preached this story from the gospel of John. So when I saw that Matthew's account of this event was one of the lectionary options I was tempted to choose something else. After all, since this is for many people a well-known story, I wondered if I would have anything new to say that you all haven't heard before.

The last few times I have preached on this text I have focused on the possibility that the miracle that took place was that people were inspired by the faith and generosity of Jesus. That maybe the reason the five loaves of bread and two fish were more than enough for 5000 men plus women and children, was because they were inspired to share whatever they had brought with them. That the miracle that took place happened because of the actions of regular people and that God needs us to participate in miracles today. It's a great message and one that I suspect will be heard from many pulpits around the world this morning. But as I was listening to one of my favorite preaching podcasts this week, I was struck by something previously hadn't caught me attention before.

The first sentence of our scripture this morning reads "When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." The translation Barb read from is the Common English Bible. It is a newer translation that was completed in 2011 and was a combined effort of the publishing houses of multiple denominations including the Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. When I have preached on this text in the past, I have typically used the New Revised Standard version (which is the translation of our pew bibles), the New International Version and a few others. The NRSV translates this opening sentence as "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew

from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” And the NIV says “When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” Did you notice a subtle difference from the version Barb read? Neither of them mention John. The Common English Bible explicitly states “When Jesus heard about John...” I had never considered before to connect this story to the one that comes right before it, the one about what happens to John the Baptist. What happened to John that caused Jesus to withdraw to a deserted place?

It begins with a feast. Not the feast that takes place in the wilderness with two fish and five loaves of bread. This feast is in honor of Herod’s birthday. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who was the ruler when Jesus was born, is the Roman ruler appointed by the emperor Augustus to rule over Galilee and Perea during the time of both John’s and Jesus’ ministry. John had condemned the marriage of Herod to his brother’s ex-wife Herodias as incestuous which led Herod to arrest John and hold him in prison. The scripture says Herod wanted to execute John but was afraid of John’s followers who considered him a prophet. But that all changes during his birthday celebration. I imagine the party was a lavish one. An abundance of all the finest foods, beautiful music, and attended by only the most important people, dressed in their finest clothes. During the celebration Salome [sa low may], the daughter of Herodias from her first marriage, dances for the guests. Her dancing pleases Herod so much that he swears an oath to give her anything she asks for. At the urging of her mother, Salome asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod grants her request immediately and the scene of the celebration ends with Salome giving the platter to her mother.

This is the news that drives Jesus into the wilderness. To grieve, to pray, to figure out what to do next. Our text from this morning then says “When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities.” I, like many other preachers and interpreters have always read this to mean that when the crowds heard that Jesus had withdrawn to the wilderness that they followed him. But in all likelihood, their following Jesus was not simply prompted by the fact that Jesus left town, but by the news of the execution of John. They too were grief stricken. They must have been angry and

heartbroken and looking for direction from Jesus about how to respond. 5000 men plus women and children, maybe 10,000 people or more in total, followed Jesus into the desert ready to follow him. Sounds like the makings of an angry mob doesn't it? Jesus had the makings of an army at his disposal. He could have used their emotional state to take revenge on Herod and maybe even start a war with Rome in an effort to take back control of Galilee and the rest of the former kingdom of Israel.

But that's not what happens. There is no revenge. There is no whipping the crowds into a violent frenzy. Their anger and grief was certainly justified, but instead of using their emotional state to perpetuate more violence, Jesus looks upon the crowds with compassion. Instead of reminding them of their pain, he heals them. Instead of marching the crowd into violent retribution, he invites them to sit. Instead of breaking bones, Jesus breaks bread. Instead of reminding them of the scarcity of their resources, he preaches abundance and everyone ate and were filled with food to spare. Instead of fear, there was comfort. Instead of hate, there was love.

How do we respond to acts of violence and aggression? Yesterday was the 5-year anniversary of the mass shooting of a Sikh temple in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The shooter had a tattoo commemorating the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers on September 11, 2001. It is believed that the shooting was rooted in racism against Muslims (even though he attacked a Sikh temple) in a growing climate of anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence. Six people were killed that morning at their place of worship. This is obviously an extreme example, but it is still happening. Just yesterday, an explosive device was set off at an Islamic center in Minneapolis. Thankfully no one was injured since the explosion happened in the office area and not in the prayer room where a dozen or so people had gathered for morning prayer. Violence against Muslims and people of Arab descent is continuing to be fueled by both political and religious leaders who enflame the fears, grief, and anger of hurting people. Not everyone of course will go to the extreme of setting off a bomb or shooting up a temple. Every day, Muslim individuals in this country and many other countries around the world, are harassed, attacked, and told to "go back to where they came from."

Jesus calls us to a different path; a path of healing, peace, and an abundance of grace. I am reminded of an incident years ago in Billings, Montana, when a window decorated for Hanukkah was broken, the home owner was advised to remove the decorations and put bars on the window. But when a fellow Billings resident read the story in the paper, she called her pastor at First Congregational UCC in Billings and suggested that members of the church all put paper menorahs in their windows. Then the newspaper printed a full page image of a menorah. Thousands of menorahs were displayed in windows throughout Billings. Vandals did break windows in some houses and businesses where the paper menorahs were displayed, but people continued to show them.¹ Instead of responding to violence with fear, the town responded with solidarity and love.

These stories are everywhere if we look for them. There's the story of people in a Philadelphia neighborhood who, when a rainbow flag clad house was attacked, filled the neighborhood with rainbow flags; in Ann Arbor Michigan where a black teen protected a white supremacist from the attacks of an angry mob; in Albuquerque, the story of grocery shoppers who, when a woman in a hijab was accosted by a fellow shopper, formed a ring around the woman in the hijab thus protecting her while other shoppers escorted the bully out of the store. How might we be called to respond with love? To be clear, responding with love is not the same as tolerating abuse or oppression. I would never advocate someone in an abusive situation to stay in that situation and respond to the abuse with love. You'll notice in this scripture that the focus isn't on showing love and compassion to Herod, but instead how Jesus acts and inspires those who are affected by Herod's injustice. Certainly, Jesus calls on us to love and pray for our enemies, but that is not the same as tolerating abuse and oppression. We can show them love and pray for them without staying in situations that cause us harm. But that's another sermon. But in those moments when we are riled up and angry, or when we perceive that our resources are threatened by the needs of others, what do we do? Do

¹ http://billingsgazette.com/news/local/a-stone-ignites-a-community-billings-stood-up-to-white/article_1595787b-b44f-5a4f-b7b2-3a18e77615b7.html

we allow our fears, our anger, our hunger, to dictate our actions, possibly enflamed by people motivated by power and greed? Or do we pray? Do we look for ways to heal? Do we have compassion for those who are hurting and seek to nourish them with love and grace? Do we trust that when we don't feel like anything we do will be enough, that God will take what we have and use it to do amazing things? When we are in the midst of righteous anger or grief, do we stop to think about what else is needed? Do we look around to see who is hurting and how can we show up for them as the hands and feet of Jesus doing God's work in the world. While we are on fire for Justice, do we use that energy to sow more anger and fear, or do we seek justice while also attending to the very real needs of the afflicted? May our love for neighbor show up in more than signs and bumper stickers and social media rants. May we also give of ourselves. To welcome all, feed all, and love all; even when we fear there will never be enough to make a difference. May it be so. Amen.