



Faith Amidst Worry

Matthew 14:13-21

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

March 15, 2020

Well, again, good morning. It's good to be gathered with you, even if this gathering is only in the digital realm. Last night, I set my alarm to wake me up this morning. The alarm is called, "normal Sunday morning." And yet, this is anything but a normal Sunday morning. Admittedly, this is a little bit awkward. I'm grateful to have a few members of the choir here with me, but that there is no one in front of me makes this a rather different experience. I can imagine it is a bit different for many of you as well. It's a challenge to not be gathered with the community on Sunday morning. We become so accustomed to the hospitality and the gracious welcome of this space, and the warmth of each other's embrace, that it's uncomfortable to feel so socially distant from one another. And yet, that is what this time calls for.

The need for social distancing, as unfamiliar as it makes this time of worship, is important for the health and well-being of our community. On Sunday mornings, we are often gathered with many individuals who are vulnerable to the coronavirus's ill effects, and the best part we can play in limiting its spread is to minimize our person-to-person contact. I am glad you are gathered from home; and I do look forward to the next time we are able to gather together in person.

Our faith proclaims, that even as we distance ourselves from one another, we are not alone. Just as we gather in worship weekly and share at the table in the presence of the of the saints who have come before us, so too do we now gather in the gracious company of one another from afar. You are not alone; you are joined in the body as witnesses to God's glory. God's love unites us, even when we are limited in our ability to be physically present together in this, or any, space.

I know there are many who are worried for what might become in the days and weeks ahead. There are parents who now have the responsibility of full-time parenting at home. Trust me when I say, I feel your pain. There are others who are worried for their jobs, and are unsure of a world of social distancing does to our capability to show up at work, or to keep our stores and businesses open. Many of our low-income community members are worried about what may happen with the social services of the community – wondering whether the food pantries and meal programs will be able to remain open. I also know that in a world fearful of a viral spread, with borders closing and travel being limited, the stock market has been volatile and there's great concern regarding how the market's recent history affects one's defined income in retirement, or future retirement.

These are all valid concerns.

In such a time of unknown, I think it's important to hold on to what we do know, and to celebrate the small victories and moments of joy in the midst of the concern. Today, I am grateful for our Open Table volunteers, who made some changes to our breakfast program on Friday to limit the spread of germs between guests, and between volunteers. And I'm thankful that they are committed to continuing to offer the Open Table Breakfast ministry on Mondays and Fridays in the weeks to come.

I'm also thankful that God works in mysterious ways. Whenever such a change, as we are facing now, is required in the life of the church, I always wonder if I should be deviating from the planned focus for worship.

I do most of my worship planning 6-12 months in advance, which helps guide the worship support from the music ministry, and with our communications and ministry planning in general. As I sat down this past week to think through worship this morning, I looked at what had been planned six months ago. The sermon title that was listed was, *Faith Amidst Worry*. The scripture passage that was planned was this text in Matthew 14. I'm always grateful when God does stuff like this. When God is thinking and moving in ways we might not even recognize. Diving in to the text, I couldn't help but think of Homer Zuckerman, the farmer in *Charlotte's Web*, as he says, and I'm obviously editing, "That'll do, God. That'll do."

As this passage in Matthew 14 begins, we are told that Jesus was withdrawing to a deserted place by himself. If we back up and read the first 12 verses in Matthew 14, we find that John the Baptist has just died at Herod's bequest. The disciples, having buried John's body, went and told Jesus what had happened. This is the news that Jesus had just heard that led him to withdraw to a deserted place.

We don't really know what Jesus was thinking, nor his own emotional well-being at that time. His first-cousin once removed, the one who had leapt in Elizabeth's womb at Mary's welcome, the one who had been born to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry, the one who had baptized Jesus in the River Jordan ... John was dead. And we are left to imagine Jesus' hurt as he socially distanced himself from the crowds. He went to get away; he took a boat to get to a deserted place.

The next sentence in this passage is a bit vague. It says, "When the crowds heard *it*, they followed him on foot from the towns." What is the "it" they heard? Did they decide to follow Jesus after hearing that John the Baptist was dead? Or, did they decide to follow Jesus after hearing that Jesus had gone away to a deserted place? Are they also grieving John's death? Are they scared they too could face the same fate as John, falling victim to Herod's grasp for power? Or, were they just wanting to be near Jesus? The text leaves the rationale up to us to decide.

Regardless why they followed him, by the time Jesus is ready to get off the boat, the crowds have already gathered. "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick." The text leads us to believe that Jesus went to the deserted place to get away. Perhaps he was looking for another 40 days in the wilderness: a time of temptation, maybe, but a time of isolation. And yet, looking around at this gathered crowd, Jesus realized that he was not the only one hurting. In the midst of his own turmoil, Jesus had compassion on them, and he healed those who were ill.

So there they are, this fairly large crowd; perhaps it was still growing as more and more people arrived to this deserted place from the local towns. It was an early version of a failed Fyre Festival or Woodstock type gathering, where nothing was well planned out. The people just showed up with no plans for how long they would be there, or where they would sleep, or even whether the stores would have any toilet paper left ... or evidently, how they would eat. "As it became evening, the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the people away so that they may go to the villages and buy food for themselves.'"

Try as he might, Jesus still has yet to convince the disciples that their primary focus is no longer to be on themselves. Jesus himself came to this space to vacate the crowds. He went to get away; it seems he was looking for a place to wallow in his own misery – isolated and alone. And yet, when the crowds showed up, he had compassion for them. Instead of having a chance to rest, he began performing miracles of healing.

The disciples did not seem to share in Jesus' compassion.

The evening is growing late. Though the text doesn't tell us the people are complaining, it seems clear the disciples have heard the early rumblings of a disgruntled and quickly hungering crowd. They are trying to mitigate the concern before it becomes an issue. "Jesus," they say, "it's getting late, there are no places for them to eat here, and they will all soon be hungry. Send them to the villages so they can go and fend for themselves."

Jesus quips back, "No, don't tell them to go find food for themselves. They don't need to go anywhere. Just feed them."

The disciples are certain they don't have that capacity, saying, "We have nothing here but five loaves [of bread] and two fish." The disciples often operate from a place of scarcity. They never see to believe that what they have is enough. They do have some food, both bread and fish, the common staples of a peasant's meal in the region of Galilee. I'd say it doesn't seem like the disciples had thought about sharing the food with the crowd, but perhaps that's exactly what they had done. Perhaps they had thought about sharing, but calculated there was no way that what they had would be enough to go around. It was going to be a pretty skimpy meal just for the disciples to share alone.

Jesus tells them, "Bring the bread and the fish here." Jesus then ordered the crowds to be seated on the grass. Rev. Mark Davis, a Presbyterian pastor in Hampton, suggests that Jesus isn't *demanding* the crowds to be seated, but that in ordering them, he was literally giving them order. He's trying to determine how best to go about feeding the masses. He takes the bread and breaks it, he blessed it, gave it to the disciples, who then passed out the fish and the bread to the crowds.

For many, this story offers a profound witness to God's miraculous power, exemplified in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ seems to have turned five loaves of bread and two fish into enough food to satiate – to fill to capacity – some 20,000 or more people. ... The text says there were 5,000 men, *plus* the women and children. Do some simple math with a common household statistic, like saying the average family has 2.5 kids ... this was no small crowd. Jesus' miracle was quite a feat.

While many read this as a miracle of God's power, others say this is the glory of God exemplified in the people of God. Those who do not say this was a miracle point to this as the power of the community to work for God's good. This claim says that as the disciples began to spread the food around, people started pulling out food they may have brought with them, and sharing it with the community as well. The food multiplied, but perhaps not out of thin air.

Either way – regardless how the food multiplied – I can only imagine what was going through the disciples' minds as they took what they thought was an insufficient meal, and found it feeding more and more people. As they reached 200, and 500, and 1,000, and 5,000, and 10,000 ... how did their demeanor change? Over 20,000 people had their fill of food, and each disciple still had a basket left to eat for themselves.

In this season of Lent, our focus is to see how Christ's faith offers sufficient faith for each of us. Even when we do not believe that what we have is enough, Christ says, "bring what you have to me. Just lay it here." "It is not his miracles that make it so hard to [have faith]. What makes it hard to believe in [Christ] is our unwillingness to give up on our prideful presumption that we are our own creators."¹ We, like the disciples, are so convinced that if we share what we have, we will not have enough. We are so convinced that it is our job to create life for ourselves, that by focusing on ourselves, we ignore the greater need of the community. When the disciples are prepared to send the 20,000 people away, Jesus says, "no, just feed them."

This is the faith of Christ – the faith that is a witness for us of what true faith looks like – what the faith of salvation looks like. “Jesus uses the disciples, even when they would rather look after themselves, to tend to the needs of those thousands of men, women, and children.”ⁱⁱ

Having faith – trusting in God’s provision – seeing the glory of God revealed in our midst – it works when we have the faith of Christ. When exhausted and worn out, when isolated and grieving, when we are trying to get away from it all, we open our eyes to see the hurt and the pain that is all around us. Christ’s faith turned him from his own misery at John’s death to have compassion on the masses, and turned the disciples from their own limited vision of caring for themselves to see how, even with what little they may have to offer, God will care for the community at large.

In the days and weeks to come, as we find ourselves socially distanced from one another, there will come a time when we will have to open *our* eyes to have compassion on the community around us. It is this compassion that compels us to be socially distant in the first place. Our distancing offers grace to the vulnerable, and provides capacity for the health care workers who are tasked to give life to the dying, and health to the sick. But be prepared, you will be asked to stop clinging to what you have for fear of scarcity, and to share with the community so that others may not have to go without. I have already engaged with some church members, staff, and community partners to identify how we might help provide support for the community in what looks to be a few weeks of separation.

For those who employ workers, whether at your office or in your home, have compassion on them. Provide compensation even if your workers are limited in their capacity to work in the weeks to come. Be gracious and compassionate with those around you.

You can give financially to the church – we are preparing ourselves to respond to the needs of the community. Though we are going to be limiting the time our staff spend in the office during the week, to share in our own practice of social distancing, we will be continuing to support the work of the church in *Making a Place for Everyone to Know God’s Love*. As a church, we will continue to share God’s blessings with the community, and do our part to care for those in the community where God has called us to live, work, serve, and play.

Lent is a season of penitence; it invites us to acknowledge our brokenness as a humanity. The coronavirus is aiding in our work of acknowledging just how frail we are. But the faith of Christ stands firm before us, and invites us to claim the power of God, that says God’s love – God’s glory – God’s grace does not isolate in fear, but that in Christ’s witness, we can trust that we will have enough to care, not only for ourselves, but for all of God’s created children. That the masses – that all people – that the community will not be sent away wanting, but through the faith of Jesus Christ, everyone might receive the blessing of God’s people.

During our Musical anthem, I invite to ponder how Christ’s faith might multiply your gifts for the health and well-being of the community.

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas. *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved March 13, 2020.