

Year A, Proper 13
August 6th, 2017
Matthew 14:13-21

Love, the Overwhelming Abundance from Which Jesus Feeds Us

We are still at the Lakeshore where Jesus has been using parables to open people's minds to a kingdom they don't know exists. It's a kingdom where love reigns and can be found, where the seemingly impossible overshadows their caught-ness in life and provides refuge, and where all misery and casting out is cast out. He has just told them that if they understand these things they will be equipped to lead their people into a new way of living that integrates old and new and is a treasure to all.

Into this scene by the lakeshore Matthew splices what has been happening to John the Baptist in his conflict with Herod. Today's lection begins with Jesus getting the news that John has been executed.

"When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." John the Baptist, the great prophet who had baptized Jesus, who had taken on Herod and stood up for morality when Herod had married his brother's wife, was dead. Jesus feels the need to get by himself and figure out what this means. Where does Jesus go from here? With his death, John the Baptist has dropped out of Jesus' constellation of relationships, his network of friends; and with his absence Jesus' must reconstruct his inner world and rethink his plan. We know about this. We have gone through this when we have lost friends, family or a life partner.

The crowds find out where Jesus is going and get there ahead of him. They come from everywhere, all the cities around.

When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. His heart went out to them. He saw their broken bodies and wounded spirits and his gut twisted. His grief at the loss of John transmutes into compassion. These people who had walked all this way to be in his presence had also lost much and not found the something they longed for but could not name. They just knew that in his presence they felt better and a tiny hope stirred them.

When we were in Little Rock, Arkansas we remembered a group of Jesus followers who had gone to Bolivia in the midsection of the last century. My parents-in-law were among them. They too looked at the crowds of suffering people and had compassion for them. They built hospitals and clinics, schools for the poor and neglected indigenous population and taught them the love of Jesus as best they could. People remember them there with so much gratitude.

Two weeks prior to leaving for Arkansas one of Laura's parishioners, who had discovered that Laura grew up in Bolivia, brought her a DVD he thought she might be interested in. The DVD had been produced by a friend of his who is an award winning documentary film maker who

had made a 50 minute film entitled "My Bolivia." It turned out that this friend's grandfather was the president of Bolivia from 1934 till 1936 but the grandson knew almost nothing about his grandfather. Living in Southern California, his parents had said little about the grandfather or Bolivia and then died leaving their son with a family mystery. Rick Tejada Flores, the grandson had heard some stories but no narrative that put it all together. In his mid-fifties he decided to go to Bolivia and unearth his family's story and make a film on what he discovered.

Laura was given permission to show this film to the 100 people gathered in Little Rock and they found it fascinating. In music, old family movies, photographs, interviews and a careful recitation of history the film recreated the Bolivian world these intrepid but very human missionaries embraced when they arrived. It was a world dominated by rich, landed and Spanish elite who lived like royalty while the vast majority of the people; poor, uneducated, and landless, toiled their short lives away working for the "patrones."

Through the film, the missionaries and their descendants were seeing Bolivia through the eyes of the descendants of the "patrones" even while we were gathered to remember the Bolivia our parents had been seeking to reform. It made for rich conversation.

Being followers of Jesus the American Methodist Missionaries identified with Christ and so embraced the poor, both the women and the men. They could see where the culture was sick and worked and suffered to heal it. They built the first schools for indigenous girls and boy in Bolivia. To do this they had to go against Bolivian cultural patterns that looked down on the Aymara and Quechua people as inferior. These missionaries weren't looking to culture for guidance; they were looking to Jesus. They too had read the story of how Jesus, though tired and in need of sorting out John's death, had compassion for the large crowd waiting to hear him.

So our Biblical text has us all out here in this isolated place with Jesus and its getting late. It's sort of like American missionaries being in Bolivia separated from their family, culture, background and all that is familiar to them and being expected to come up with something for people to eat when they don't even know the people that well. Anyway, the disciples come to Jesus and say we must send these people to town or home because we have nothing to feed them. We must send them back to depend on their own resources. We have nothing to give them.

Is that true? What about the gospel? I thought it was supposed to feed people. What about the kingdom of God, the pearl of great price, the treasure found in the field, the yeast that transforms the dough? What do you mean; you have nothing to give them? "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat."

So those idealistic and faithful young families took what they had and fed the people. They build hospitals and clinics, schools of all sizes and churches and trained nurses and pastors for the institutions they established. They wrote plays for the teenagers and presented Bible stories using felt figures on felt boards for the children. They took their ability to organize and the gift of their outside resources to uplift and nurture the people.

To the indigenous people “the missionaries” became an example of what you can do if you feast on God’s love, overcome ancient rivalries and find yourself valued by those with more power than you. The people’s self-esteem rose and they discovered that they could do the same things that the children of landlords could do. There was no difference. They too were loved and blessed children of God.

What is the something to eat that we have to offer our culture? Could it be our engagement in non-violence and the practice of forgiveness, the way we take in and offer Jesus’ broken body to all? Our culture certainly needs that.

When Jesus heard about John’s broken body he went off to be by himself. He had to figure something out. He was interrupted in his musings by a great crowd gathered at the place where he hoped to retreat. His heart went out in compassion and healing. Was that the place where he realized what he must do next? John’s body was broken against his will and everyone lost. Jesus will offer his body to be broken and the whole world will gain. He will give himself to be broken by our violence and in that act show us the depth of his love. He will become the broken bread that satiates our hunger.

When his disciples told him about the five loaves of bread and the two fish he said “Bring them here to me.” Was that the moment he realized what was required and where his mission would take him now that John was dead?

“He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart.” Did he know this would happen to his body and that it would be our violence that broke it?

He gave the broken parts to his disciples who gave them to the crowds. Is that what disciples always do—take Jesus’ broken body and pass it on? Could it be his broken body is the center of power rather than a thrusting spear breaking someone else’s body?

“Then the disciples gave the broken bread to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.”

John did not choose to offer himself to human violence but Jesus did. That love is the overwhelming abundance from which Jesus feeds us?