

Sermon 9 Pentecost Year A 2020

*Matthew 14:13-21*

Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted.

Jesus preached these bold words during his well-known Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This amazing proclamation was his first public teaching and preaching recorded in Matthew. I think it is always easy to be bold at the beginning of a project, before you have experienced the setbacks and resistance to accomplishing the vision that inspires. As time goes on we become more cautious, and maybe more realistic.

Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted. It isn't so easy to be comforted by smooth words when you are mourning the death of a person dear to you. Words don't change reality. In our experience death is irreversible. As King David said when his infant son died, 'I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.' (2 Samuel 12:23). Yet, Jesus boldly preached that those who mourn shall be comforted.

Then the news of John the Baptist's death is brought to him by some of John's disciples. And now it is time for him to practice what he preached. In our gospel reading Jesus has just heard the news that his cousin John has been brutally murdered at the instigation of a vengeful woman. This murder is the culmination of a series of very sordid, immoral circumstances. John was regarded as a prophet by the people, but he was also Jesus' cousin and childhood playmate. He was also a spiritual companion. John baptized him. John recognized him as the Lamb of God and prepared the way for him. Jesus was deeply and personally moved by the news of his death.

Although Herod and his wife had committed John's murder as a public political statement that they would not allow any criticism or moral rebuke of their scandalous behavior, his death had a personal and private impact on Jesus. When he heard the news he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself, away from the public eye. He had a personal and private relationship with his cousin John, the depth of his grief needed to be experienced in private. He sought the comfort of silence.

Jesus had no intention of escalating the violence in response to the news John's disciples brought to him. Jesus withdrew from public presence to seek comfort with his closest friends and disciples. They went away in a boat. Living by the lake or the river do you find peace and rest in by the water? I do, the waters are gently quiet, they feed my soul with peace.

Often people seek to comfort us by the heaping up of empty phrases. They talk and talk at us, until we can't think. We can learn how to comfort others from Job's friends. They met together to go and console and comfort him. They saw his distress and sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. (Job 2:13) Yet Jesus was given no time for his private grief.

John was a public figure. His life, peaching, and prophecy had impacted the lives of many, convicting them of their sins and offering them the hope of forgiveness in the cleansing waters of his baptism. They grieved and looked for the presence of Jesus to make sense of this murder and to comfort them. They followed him on foot from the towns, they got to the quiet place ahead of the boat and were there on the lakeshore, waiting for him when he arrived.

Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted. Jesus did not turn away and depart for another place. Jesus came to them. When he saw them he had compassion for them and he cured and healed their sick. How hard it is in the midst of our own mourning when other people press in upon us, wanting us to comfort their grief as if our more personal relationship and grief with the one who has died would be a means of grace and comfort for their grief.

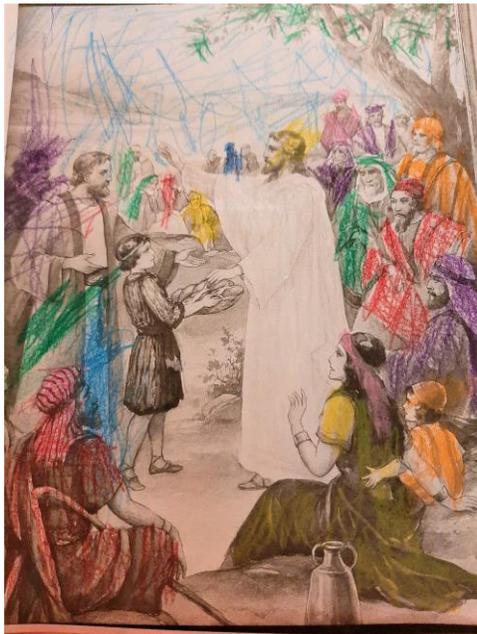
This great crowd came to Jesus seeking relief, seeking comfort. Jesus understood, he looked on them with compassion and cured their sick. In this pandemic time, we are warned that in crowds there is a

greater risk of transmission. We are cautioned to stay home if we have symptoms. The contagious are a reminder of the ever presence of death among us. So it is amazing to me that even in the midst of their grief the people wanted to bring their sick with them to find Jesus.

They were justified in their trust. Jesus has compassion, the power to save. That Christ heals their sickness, their bodies is the sign and seal of the fulfillment of the prophecy of John, 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' (Luke 3:6). In the healing of the physical condition comes also the restoration of the soul, the peace of mind that looks forward into the future, the years ahead with hopeful expectation. When there is sickness or death in a household then healthy eating gets disrupted, we skip meals, we lose our appetite. We may eat, but we are filled, we seek comfort in food but we aren't satisfied. How many pandemic pounds have you gained?

In the healing of our physical bodies comes also a renewed interest in daily life and our natural appetite returns. We get hungry and begin to wonder 'what's for supper?' Which brings us to the well-known and to me best part of today's readings. Jesus invited the whole crowd to stay for dinner, to share a meal with him. Jesus fed them. They all ate and were filled, they all ate and were satisfied. Jesus cured the sick. He restored them to health, to life and then he fed them. Jesus had compassion on the crowd; his compassion is the power of God to feed us the bread of life, the food that truly satisfies all human need for the body and the soul. Comfort food.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. The comfort food we seek from Christ Jesus is always available to us. "So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father." (Ephesians 2:17-18). By his life, death, resurrection and ascension Christ has poured out for us eternal peace and comfort. His grace is sufficient to comfort our deepest grief and heal all the ills of our bodies and souls. Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted. Jesus has promised, 'I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you.' (John 14:18). Hear God's Word of Truth. The body of Christ, the bread of life is broken for you. Take, eat and be filled and comforted. Amen.



Picture colored by Ava Marie