

“Finding Your Purpose Again”

+ 7 Pentecost A +

Isaiah 55:1-5; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

August 3, 2014

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! The texts for this morning's message are the lessons for this day, particularly these words from the Gospel, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."

Did you get the feeling today's Gospel started in an odd place? "Now when Jesus heard this..." Heard what? What would cause Jesus to withdraw in a boat to a deserted place by himself? Well, the story isn't pretty. Word had reached him about King Herod's birthday bash where Salome, his step-daughter/niece (he married his brother's ex-wife who was also his cousin) - where Salome dazzled the guests with her dancing. And Herod fueled by lust and alcohol made a foolish promise to give her whatever she wanted. Who would have guessed that she'd ask her mother who would turn down ½ a kingdom of wealth for the head of John the Baptist on a platter!

John the Baptizer, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah; the first to recognize Jesus as Lord when, just a pre-born lad himself, he'd leaped in his mother's womb in the presence of Jesus who was but a tiny speck of an embryo, very recently conceived by the Holy Spirit and growing beneath His mother, Mary's heart.

Jesus, having heard his cousin, the one who had baptized Him in the river Jordan had been murdered on the whim of this evil king, left Herod's kingdom behind and got into a boat seeking the solace of a wilderness full of loneliness. It was not His time to face Herod and, as fully human as we are, He left to mourn the death of His friend – He left to have some time alone. That is, perhaps, the most important insight to keep from the Gospel this morning: how like us Jesus was in this world, how His heart ached with grief for His friend and cousin, John; He retreated to put things into perspective – He mourned as we mourn for those we have loved and lost – lost for a while to death.

This past week I journeyed to Milwaukee for the funeral of a dear college friend of 43 years, Karen "Effie" Friedrich, who died suddenly of a heart attack and was found last Saturday in her apartment by her sister. The funeral was quite moving and being with her Mom, Dorothy, her sisters Linda & Judy, reconnecting with other college friends from the past helped in absorbing this tragic and unexpected loss. The pastor preached an excellent sermon based on Karen's famous ability to be happy and celebratory, "Rejoice in the Lord, always, and again I say, rejoice!" 50 children, past and present students at Elm Grove Lutheran School sang. I was honored to be the assisting minister – read the lessons, chanted the Psalm. At the cemetery her many pastor and teacher friends from Michigan, Illinois and Minnesota were able to join her pastor in singing, "Abide With Me." Glorious – and yet, I was so grateful to have those 6 hours of driving through the hills of Wisconsin, alone, to look at the splendors of creation, reflect on

the greatness and goodness of our God, mercy that never ends, love shared between the best of Christian friends that doesn't fade and change and to grieve.

That is what Jesus was seeking as he stepped into a boat to set sail for the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, only to discover that He couldn't shake the press of the crowd that chased Him streaming along the shore waiting for Him to reach land. We don't know if He'd put up a sail in the boat or been rowing – getting lost in the physical effort, the rhythm of exercise and the deep breaths to give His mind freedom to remember, reflect and put things into perspective. What we do know is that when ministry called, despite His grief, He served those who came to Him, *“He had compassion for them and cured their sick.”*

In the movies about the Gospels and the life of Jesus the miracles are most often the highlight – and, truly, the bread and fish for 5000 is impressive—no question about that—but the miracle of Jesus' loving compassion in the midst of His own personal grief is the miracle that lasted long after the leftovers were picked up and everybody went home.

Loss, it comes in many forms. The loss of a spouse, parent, child – close friend or co-worker can be difficult to process. Often, in the midst of grieving, one wonders why the world can't just stop for a moment – not just in honor or respect – but just slow down, enable one to catch their breath. But, as Jesus found with the crowd before Him – life, life with great pain and illness, aching, horrible needs goes on. Instead of giving Him some time, bringing Him a casserole and a caring embrace, Jesus reaches out to touch, to heal, to bring love and compassion (suffering along with – a powerful image) into this situation. He found Himself – His purpose and meaning – in carrying out God's will of love, healing and restoration.

In our unsettled times with millions of refugees, a war between Israel and the Gaza strip that seems to have relegated the collapse of Libya, the horrendous ongoing war of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, even the unprecedented outbreak of Ebola in countries in West Africa with direct ties to the Twin Cities and all the troubles with under-employment and unrest in our own country it is difficult, we live in a time when it is common to struggle with a loss of self-worth and identity. When Luther faced such troubles and pain he would write over and over like a child doing sentences, “I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized.”

As individuals and as God's people gathered we find our identity again and anew in the waters of baptism where we are named as God's much loved child; in the family meal we share with those immediately surrounding us and all the saints throughout the world and in heaven's glory at the Feast of Victory for our God. We find ourselves as Christians outside these doors investing our lives in love and compassion for others. This Tuesday night, as a congregation, we will celebrate with our neighbors for National Night Out. 3 Praise Bands, food & fun, games and prizes. Bring your friends, ask a neighbor. We have room for 300 people more each Sunday. One of my seminary friends, Pastor Victor Belton, who is my age: 60, wrote on Facebook yesterday,

I am so done playing, yes playing, nice, safe, comfortable, easy, non sacrificial, on automatic, 'church', games that save no one, do not promote the Kingdom of God, gets no one baptized, disciples not one single soul, encourages no one in love for Jesus, builds no fellowship in the community,

and hinders personal and corporate spiritual growth and development. The LCMS did not do this to me! (at once saint and sinner)I am not a victim of denominational brainwashing. I know what is right. It is time to do it. IT'S ON NOW! Who is with me?

Victor is a passionate – a black pastor with a white congregation in Atlanta. His fire has inspired the youth of the LCMS at many a National Gathering – and I feel that same fire as I look at Jehovah. We don't have to look far to see those in need of hope and healing in the blocks that surround us. Our Open Arms Infant/Child Care/ Pre-K and Central Lutheran School have so many open doors to ministry.

Perhaps the greatest question is how the depth of our compassion will shape our vision. Paul said to the Romans in our lesson today, *“For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.”* He was willing to give up his own eternity in the presence of Jesus for the sake of the Jewish nation – that they might know the love and salvation that is ours through Jesus Christ! In our Bible study of 1 Corinthians we recently pondered these words of Paul, *“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some of them.”*

Just where the compassion of Jesus will lead God's people in this place remains to be seen – but I am convinced it will be both powerful and although well-planned and plotted will also be quite unexpected in many ways – that is how the Spirit works. It is as the words of this prayer from Evening Prayer state:

Now may our glorious and generous God who waters the world with His grace, awaken in us a hunger for the food that satisfies both body and soul and with this food, fill all the starving world. AMEN.