

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT!

Matthew 14:13-21

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13)
Analysis by Steven Kuhl**

13Now when Jesus heard [about the beheading of John the Baptist], 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. 14When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 18And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

DIAGNOSIS: "Send the Crowds Away" (v. 15)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Withdrawing as a*

Form of Self-Protection

Jesus and his disciples are finding themselves more and more at odds with and threatened by the power brokers of the world. John the Baptist had spoken “truth to power” and was beheaded by King Herod for doing so. Jesus had spoken high praise of John, noting the inescapable connection between their mutual ministries (11:7-19), and that fact has not been lost on Herod (14:1-2). So, hearing about the news of John, Jesus and his disciples physically withdraw (v. 13) to a deserted place. What does that mean? The disciples think, mistakenly, that they withdrew for the sake of self protection. Accordingly, when they see the crowds, they can think of only one response: “Send them away!” (v. 15). The disciples are in the mode of self preservation, not of ministry, or self-giving, to the crowds.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Spiritually Withdrawn from Jesus

Although the disciples had physically withdrawn with Jesus from the power centers of the world, spiritually their hearts had not. In their hearts they were withdrawn from Jesus and connected to the power of Herod. The sure sign of this fact is that they were oblivious to the presence of Jesus to provide. They still thought only in terms of the “towns and villages” (v. 16), the place where Herod-like power ruled, as the only power that can provide what the crowd (and they) needed. Indeed, their hearts were actually turned in on themselves. The crowds, they assert, should “buy for themselves” (v. 16), a sure sign that they believed, too, that they were now in the wilderness, needing to fend for themselves. Indeed, their hearts were withdrawn from Jesus, faithless.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Withdrawn from Blessings

At that moment, the real threat to the disciples was not Herod, though they do not realize it. On the contrary, they were

actually relatively successful in withdrawing physically from Herod at the moment. Rather, their real threat at the moment was God, whose power is over Herod and all, who gives bread to the just and the unjust, and whose anger runs hot on sinners who presume upon his generosity. To withdraw from Jesus at this moment left them as defenseless sinners against God's judgment. Why? Because their of faithlessness they are withdrawn from the "blessing of Jesus," who alone has the power that truly "fills us up," that is, to satisfy what we need before God.

PROGNOSIS: "You Give Them Something to Eat" (v. 16)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Intervening with Blessing: "Bring them here to me" (v. 18)*

Although Jesus' fledgling disciples (including you and me) in no way deserve it, Jesus nevertheless shows his "compassion" (v. 16) to them/us just as he did for the crowd. In the face of the disciples unfaith (and their resolve to turn away the very crowd Jesus had just welcomed) he intervenes saying "Bring [whatever you have] here to me." Of course, that, too, is fledgling. And note the irony here. The disciples actually had nothing. They went and confiscated a boy's lunch of bread and fish (v. 17). So when Jesus says bring "them to me," he does not primarily mean that which is theirs rightly. For even that which they have at the moment is not really theirs rightly-but a sign of their presumption before God. For the boy was among those whom they also sought to send away. So when Jesus says, "bring them here to me," the "them," which is the bread and fish, is also a sign of their unfaith, of their sin and of their desire to desert their neighbor in need. But that is precisely what Jesus asks them (and us) to bring to him. And he "blesses" it! He blesses it by making it his own, by dying our death (God's judgment on sinners) on the cross, and transforming it into resurrection and new life-more than what was their before, infinitely more than what we deserve!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Drawing Us to Him in Faith: “All ate and were filled” (v. 20)*

What Jesus is doing in the “blessing of the lunch” is not only feeding the multitude their evening supper. Even more than conquering hunger with food, he is conquering the disciples’ unbelief with his blessing, with his compassion, with his faithfulness, with his cross and resurrection, turning them/us to faith. Indeed, this feeding is for disciples (then and now) a sign of the Lord’s Supper, the Holy Communion, whereby Christ draws us, the withdrawn, anew to himself in faith as the one who alone provides what we truly need: the forgiveness of sins, sustenance to overcome the just judgment of God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Engaged with Our Neighbor: “You give them something to eat” (v. 16)*

“Faith seeks understanding,” so the old adage of Anselm goes. But even more “faith brings understanding.” What was Jesus doing when he “withdrew” to a deserted place? Was he seeking self-protection? Not at all! On the contrary, he was drawing near to those for whom Herod’s kind of power had no use, whose faith in God was waning, and whose God forsakenness was most evident. The time will come when Jesus will confront the powers that be and the contrast between his “will to compassion” and their “will to power” will be more than Herod-like rulers can stand. But he doesn’t press that confrontation like a political zealot. Rather, he presses on simply to show “compassion... and cure the sick” (v. 16). Moreover, that is also precisely what Jesus encourages his disciples (then and now) to do when he says, “You give them something to eat” (v. 16). Christians may not often find themselves in the limelight of political power and favor. Indeed, often they may find themselves at odds with it. But that’s not the point. The point is to bring the compassion of Christ to bear at the place we find ourselves: “you feed them,” you be the Christ-connected agent for “the care and redemption

of all that God has made.” The gospel truth is that the margins of society are often the center of God’s greatest work, his saving work. Just as that lonely cross on the outskirts of the city was the center of God’s power to save, so, wherever we find ourselves, there is the place to bring his blessing; there is the center of God’s power to bless in Christ. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat” (v. 16).