

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

THE FLEEING OF FUTILITY

Matthew 14:13-21

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Analysis by Steven C. 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 and 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: The Futility of Fleeing

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Futile Efforts*

To the disciples of Jesus at this moment everything seems to be futile (fruitless), the evidence of which is the futile fate of

John the Baptist. In spite of his best made efforts to do as God commissioned him, to call Herod to repentance, Herod didn't change his sinful ways. On the contrary, John's efforts to speak repentance to power ended not with Herod's repentance but with John's beheading (14:1-12). Not even Herod's "fear of the crowd" (14:5), who supported John, kept Herod from exercising his evil ways, though it did make him think twice about what to do with John's truth. How tempting it is, in the face of this "reality," for agents of God to flee from their assigned places and seek refuge in hiding, in what Matthew here describes as "a deserted place" (v. 13).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Futile Hearts

Of course, these agents of God will soon discover that in truth there is no such thing as a "deserted place" either. For no matter where they go, there the trials and challenges and threats of the world will follow. This is illustrated by the physical reality of the "crowd" and their needs. (Note this difference between Herod and the crowd: Herod lived in the delusion of his power, in pride; the crowd here lives in the disillusionment of their powerlessness, in despair.) In essence, then, the disciples discover that fleeing is itself a futile effort. And yet, they persist in their flight by fleeing from the crowd in their hearts. Their hearts' desire, ironically, is that the crowd be sent away (v. 15) so that they may spare themselves of the futility of life they see in these people. The apparent futility (fruitlessness) of their efforts reveals the deeper futility (faithlessness) of their hearts. Their hearts exhibit the same futility (call it despair or faithlessness) as the crowd.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Futile God

Tragically, the disciples' futile hearts leave them in the same situation as Herod. For in their hopelessness, in their powerlessness, in their faithlessness, they stand just as much

opposed to God's help as Herod. It is not as though God is not obviously there to help the disciples. He is. Jesus is God's help, but they don't see him that way. Rather, tragically, as their hearts fled from the crowd so too they have fled from Christ and his help. All this foreshadows what is overtly revealed at the time of Jesus' arrest: "Then the disciples all deserted him and ran away" (26:56). They take Christ's words, "you give them something to eat" (v. 16), as a futile word, seeing him as a futile God, indeed, no God, no help at all. Looking to the food in hand rather than believing the word of Christ to them (v. 17), they are left with the food only, which is certainly not enough-not nearly enough in the face of the Baptist's call to a repentance that is demanded of all-Herod, the crowd, and the disciples alike. To regard as futile the presence of God's help in Christ is to be left helpless, futile, in a truly "deserted place," a place bereft of the help of God, and not only with regard to the threat of hunger, but ultimately with regard to the judgment of God.

PROGNOSIS: The Fleeing of Futility

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Fruitful Christ, Fruitful Intervention*

In this story of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus demonstrates that his word and promise to his disciples is not futile. In a calm and deliberate manner, he intervenes and takes matters (food) into his own hands: he "blessed," "broke," and "gave" it to the disciples to distribute (v. 19). The lesson is clear: Christ's word is fruitful beyond our imagination! There was more than enough (v. 20)! But this story is a parable foreshadowing an even more profound word of Christ: The word of forgiveness to those who sense the overwhelming futility of repentance (of confessing their sins) because they cannot begin to imagine how they might satisfy it with the matter they have at hand. Here Jesus again takes matters into his own hands. For

our sake, because of our sin, he himself is “broken” on a cross and “blessed” in his resurrection to initiate the offer of forgiveness and new life in his name. This word and promise of forgiveness through the crucified and risen Lord is enacted in the calm and deliberate blessing, breaking, and distributing of the matter (bread and wine) of the Lord’s Supper: His body given and shed for the forgiveness of sins (26:26-29).

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Fruitful Hearts*

Of course, the offer is futile until it is embraced in faith. Faith is the fleeing of futility and the embracing of the word of forgiveness. And it is for this end that Jesus constantly intervenes with the word of his promise. To believe is to “take up” what Jesus offers. In this case, the disciples not only “take up” the abundance of bread that is left over (v. 20), but they also “take up” into their hearts the word and promise of Jesus, concerning his death and resurrection, concerning the matter (bread and wine) of his Supper: the forgiveness of their sins. No longer are their hearts fixated on daily bread or the hopelessness of the crowd or the threats of the world’s Herods. On the contrary, they are fixated on “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (4:4): that word being Christ himself.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Fruitful Service*

Fruitful (faith-filled) hearts naturally spring into active, fruitful service. Service is the opposite of the flight from the world that is borne of futility. Service is itself the fleeing of futility. Not only does Jesus give the matter of his death and resurrection, the matter of his Supper, the very forgiveness of sins, to his disciples, but, in turn, he also gives his disciples to the world, a world that is mired in futility. Jesus gives his disciples to the world not only with penultimate words like, “You give them something to eat” (v. 16), but with the ultimate word, “Go, therefore, and make disciples... baptizing... and teaching...” (28:19-20). Just as by the power of this word,

confession is not a futile undertaking, but a fruitful opening for forgiveness of sin, so by the power of his word, the crowds are not a futile, hopeless mass of humanity, but the ones for whom Christ died, the ones he has given us to serve, the ones in whom his word too will bear fruit.