

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

A Leader For All (Times, Places, Peoples)

Matthew 14:13-21

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(Proper 13-Sunday between July 31 and August 6 Inclusive)

analysis by Carolyn Schneider

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: Wrong

Step 1-Initial Diagnosis: Wrong Place and Time

This text reflects a crisis of place and time. It follows on the heels of the death of John the baptizer, killed by their political leader, King Herod. There is a crisis of leadership: a spiritual leader is dead, and their political leader is dangerous and untrustworthy. Jesus himself withdraws to the “deserted place” in the midst of this crisis; but the crowds follow him. When they get there, and when it gets dark and the dinner hour has passed, the disciples want them “sent away.” This is the wrong place and wrong time for food.

Step 2-Advanced Diagnosis: Wrong People

With these limited resources in the midst of crises, the decision of the disciples represents also our desire to “send away” others – pointing to a spiritual deficiency that runs counter to the desire or hope of Jesus. When loaded down with more than we can handle, to whom or what do we run to? The disciples see only five loaves and two fish – too few resources for so many. At heart, we are wrong people in trusting in, relying on, our limited resources. And we may want to get away from the limitations, even by having others “leave” us alone.

Step 3-Final Diagnosis: Wrong Way

But if we escape to where Jesus is not, where will we go? Might we also go to a place that is truly deserted – where the powerful do as they please, where the conscience is deadened, and where the reign of sin and death and God is against us. Still, if we stay in this “deserted” place with so many, with limited resources, we also do not find refuge from the crisis – even the divine crisis of our souls. There is no exit, only wrong turns.

PROGNOSIS: Right

Step 4-Initial Prognosis: Right(eous) Way

Jesus in the midst of our crisis, in the midst of our “deserted” times and places, and with us as “deserted” peoples, makes all the difference. Under Jesus’ cruciformed leadership, sin is overcome by forgiveness and death dies to his new life. God has seen to us as people for whom there is compassion and cure, putting us in the right(eous) pathway of our Lord.

Step 5-Advanced Prognosis: Right(eous) People

Because Jesus is with us, we are the right people. Of our own resources, we cannot meet the demands placed upon us; but in Jesus all those demands are met, and he gives himself so that we may cling to his work that overcomes crisis as our own. In the midst of our limitations, Jesus calls us to “bring them here to me,” so that he may fill our weary beings. He takes our limited resource upon himself, but blesses us with an abundance of fulfillment.

Step 6-Final Prognosis: Right Place and Time

Through the work of Jesus for us, in us, and through us, everyone in the crowd eats until they are full. But it’s not just the crowd that is full. Even the baskets are brimming with leftovers. There are twelve baskets full, one for each disciple, more than they will need. Their resources go from zero to overflowing when Jesus locates himself in their midst and for them. We disciples are not left homeless or without, and through our Lord’s presence in our midst, neither are our neighbors. Because Jesus is with us “always,” where we are is always the right time and place for us to let people see and hear, touch and taste the compassion of our Lord, the foretaste of things to come. “They need not go away.”