

9<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

Sermon 8.6.17

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-5  
Matthew 14:13-21

Let's watch to see what he'll do, what he'll say. Let's tune in because this could get interesting. He's got a crowd gathered, after all—and you know how crowds are, how restless they are, how quickly they can turn. That esprit de corps: it can flip from unifying to menacing, turn on a dime. It all depends on who's in charge, who's out front, rallying, *riling*. It all depends on the intent of that one in charge, and the rhetoric. "What will he say?" Really, the one who's got a crowd in the palm of his hand is powerful indeed, could even be dangerous.

As for members of a crowd, they might find themselves acting in ways other than what they'd do if they were on their own. They might find themselves laughing at things they don't really find funny, or riled up about something that's not really *theirs* to feel so strongly about. I think of all the people who've had their reputations smeared because they cozied up too close to power, did whatever it took and said whatever they needed to say in order to hold that place. Those people can get steamrolled. It's as old a phenomenon as the schoolyard: laugh at the joke the bully tells, and only later (maybe when confronted) do you realize, that joke was racist, that joke was vile, or some such.

So let's watch because here we are, a crowd gathered, all attention on the one the crowd had gathered to see. Let's tune in because this could get really good.

What would he say? It could be anything. I mean, it's not like he had a teleprompter. This could go wildly off script.

Plus, he had plenty of grievances he could work out here. He had plenty he could complain about. "Unfair!" in today's political parlance: there was plenty to scream "Unfair!" about. There was that thing, for example, that the story notes he'd just heard, though the story doesn't tell us what he'd just heard—or at least not our short section of the story.

This is what he'd just heard: that John the Baptizer had been beheaded at Herod's birthday party. Over dinner, Herod's step-daughter had danced for his dinner guests—she who was also his niece, the daughter of Herod's brother and Herodias whom was now also Herod's wife. He'd taken his brother's wife from his brother because he wanted her, so now he had his brother's wife and his brother's daughter—she who danced for the guests and who

so pleased Herod that he said to her on oath he'd grant her whatever she might ask. Having no ideas herself, her mother encouraged her: "Give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

But of course she'd say that. Herodias had always hated John the Baptizer. She hated him because he kept saying —*prophesying*— that this marriage between Herod and Herodias was unlawful. She hated him also because Herod liked him. Though he feared him and also resented him, he yet liked to listen to him, or so it's said. So Herod kept John in the dungeon at the foundation of his palace. (There's always a dungeon at the foundation of a palace. It seems important not to lose sight of that.) Because he couldn't simply let John go free, wandering around proclaiming the marriage of the governor unlawful. He had to contain that. But he also couldn't kill it off. He feared John's disciples too much. (Now, *they* were a handful.) But he also liked listening to John, and he might miss John if he were really gone.

But now he would be. Beheaded as party entertainment, now he'd really be gone — John's disciples having come and retrieved the mutilated body and prepared it for burial and buried it, buried *him*.

Then they went and told Jesus.

Meanwhile, though, Herod had begun to hear reports about Jesus, and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him." So much for John really being gone — for now he was back, or so Herod thought. It was the paranoid thinking of someone whose leadership he himself suspected was illegitimate, was ever under the threat of being taken away.

As for Jesus, when he heard about his cousin John, this person whom he might have felt closest to in all the world, Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.

The wording is interesting, don't you think? "Withdrew," "deserted place," "by himself": it's as if the story wants us to know, to really understand, the solitude Jesus was seeking, and perhaps felt inside. Solitude? Or was it isolation — the hollowing out that grief can do, the harrowing out that fear and dread can do? He would be next, after all. He would, as ever, follow in John's footsteps. His herald, his way-maker in the world, John had been, had *always* been; so Jesus would follow John as ever he did. Sooner or later, the reckless

power of brutal empire, the *feckless* power of stupid leadership, would come after him. How does he feel about that? What would he *do* about that?

The crowd complicated things. This crowd that came for God knows what reason, hoping to find in Jesus or with Jesus God knows what: they came on foot from the towns after having heard themselves about John's death. Thousands of them came, but why? There must have been as many reasons for their coming as there were people who came: thousands.

Concern for Jesus? (How would this loss affect him? Would he be heartbroken? Frightened? Swayed from his task? Enraged?)

Or anxiety for themselves and all in Judea? (What would this mean for them?)

Or shock at this sudden, stupid turn of events? (What? John? Why John?)

Or resignation? (Of course Herod killed him. That's what Herods do.)

Or resentment? (This is the last straw after so many straws had piled up, counting back through time immemorial, the recitation of which some could do on demand. We're keeping count; we're always keeping count.)

Or vengeance? (Now they'd get what was coming to them — those in charge, those elites. Who were they up against this worked up crowd thousands of people strong?)

Here they came, thousands of people with thousands of reasons, following him on foot from the towns. And when Jesus saw them, as he approached the shore on this little boat — their quiet, their agitation, their yearning, their naked need and assured presence — he had compassion for them. He cured their sick. He moved among them, walked among his people.

Then evening began to fall and people grew hungry — and not just spiritually hungry, but actually hungry. That dangerous sort of hungry, it messes with your mind, your blood sugar level dipping and giving you the shakes — and that's on top of your already heightened feelings.

The disciples noticed all this. That's what I think. They noticed this, so when they went to Jesus 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," they did so not simply for pragmatic reasons. It wasn't just the plain fact that they had no apparent means for appeasing the growing hunger. It was also the increasing risk of allowing the crowd to stay too long under these circumstances, night falling, darkness deepening, hunger adding to the already present need, even desperation. The disciples weren't simply being practical, they

were also being cautious in the face of real and growing danger. Somebody could get hurt out here, and someone else could do the hurting, which could create a whole dynamic, a downward spiral into chaos. You know, chaos is always a risk when you're in a deserted place. The formlessness, the un-civility of it: these are breeding grounds for real damage.

What were all those stories coming out the Superdome following Hurricane Katrina?

They also amount to an opportunity, though. When things have degraded to this degree, when civilization is out of reach and the law is not only slack but absent altogether, these amount to a real opportunity for someone to take charge, for a strong man to come in and take control; and people in this state are easily turned into slaves, totally devoted to the one in charge. All that one in charge needs to do is give the crowd something to eat; then you can get them to do your bidding, give them somewhere to direct their energy, some other on which to work out their frustration, fear, and rage.

I can think of someone this crowd could be unified around and mobilized against. Can you? How far away could his palace have been? A day's journey? Maybe two? Were the disciples worried about what Jesus might do? Were they deeply wondering, "What will he say?"

Mark's gospel makes the potential for vengeance clearer than Matthew's. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is remembered to have sat the crowd down in groups of hundreds and of fifties, which is exactly how a commander would muster troops for an attack. Gather them in battalions, companies, platoons, and then give them their orders and send them forth. Were the disciples worried? Jesus had seemed pretty upset about the murder of John. Jesus had been close with John, right? Isn't that right? He'd defended him that one time, when people were upset that John was such a drag, rough of dress, rough of speech, no fun really. But Jesus defended him: "What did you go into the wilderness after John looking for? A reed shaken by the wind? John is John. Deal with it." So his death: this might be quite a devastation, and it might come with attending temptation, because now he had this army of fellows in grievance and all he'd have to do is feed them and they'd be his, maybe even literally eating out of the palm of his hand.

Risk all around. A hungry crowd can turn on itself or can be turned against an "other," some common enemy. So, really, please, Jesus, "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."

Why do we assume *the* temptation in the wilderness is the only time Jesus was tempted in the wilderness? That epic showdown when Jesus was driven by the spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil: why do we assume this only happened once, and early on in his ministry when Jesus emerged in tact, triumphant; really, emerged as the Christ. In Luke's gospel, it says the tempter retreated and waited for an opportune time to try again. Maybe this struck as an opportune time.

But, no, the disciples wouldn't stand idly by. "Send the crowds away that they may buy food for themselves." As if, "Remember, Jesus: don't turn those stones to bread..." for in doing so you'll turn your people into your slaves instead of true people, truly human, living lives that are full and rich and free for their having freely chosen the love of God which is freely offered to be freely received. "Send the crowds away. They'll find food for themselves. You've done enough here."

What would he say?

...

This: "You give them something to eat."

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That they did is generally the thing we marvel at. That the disciples were able to feed this crowd of hungry thousands, and of only five loaves of bread and two fish, is generally the thing thought marvelous, incredible. And I suppose that's right. It *is* marvelous. It *does* strain credulity. But it's also typical of Jesus. He's the manifestation of God in the world, after all. He's the thing by which the Lord God is made most concentrated amidst God's creation. So why not that his presence could make possible the impossible, make sufficient things that seem so *insufficient*? If we accept him as the Christ, the one whose way is salvation for all the world, then why not accept his ability to do this—five loaves of bread and two fish?

No, here's what's amazing: this genius idea that Jesus came to when his choices seemed already set before him, that he send the crowd away so they could see to their own needs, or that he enslave the crowd into his very own personality cult and then maybe mobilize them against everything that's wrong with the world according to Jesus at this very moment? Instead, Jesus formed the church.

It will come as no surprise to you to learn that I think we live in a time that is ripe with opportunity to nurse our sense of grievance—personal grievance, cultural grievance. Someone

has done me wrong—as a woman, I suffer; as a white person, I’m losing ground; as a member of Generation X, I’m terribly misunderstood; as a mother, I sacrifice so much; as a clergy person, I don’t enjoy the status this position used to bring and instead have to endure people’s skepticism or even scorn. And, of course, though worthy of attention as many grievances are (mine, however, not so much), to hold them too close, to identify with them overmuch, and to nurse them with any such dedication is to set so much of civil discourse, and even life in our society, as constantly adversarial, to set ourselves as always on the defensive, and to court vengeance, even violence.

To that older man who, while at a Trump rally last year, punched an exiting and self-possessed protester in the face: why?

To that man with the handgun strapped in the name of self-defense to his side while heading into a Home Depot in the open-carry state of New Hampshire: why?

To my Facebook friend who trolls a vegan page to point out to its members—and in all caps, mind you—how privileged veganism is, how it disenfranchises the poor and demonizes those who work in the food industry and is dominated by lucky white cis-women in yoga pants: why?

To the man who stood up and hollered at Tobias for bumping the back of his wife’s seat at the movie theater—hollered at him, “Why don’t you keep your feet on the ground like a normal person?” (and, no, the irony wasn’t lost on me that we were there watching the movie *Dunkirk*, in which the Allied troops are literally fighting to save civilization from the nihilistic frenzy that might have taken down the whole world; but here we were nonetheless struggling to figure out, and really risking it all, whose grievance was greater, the man whose wife suffered a couple of jabs to the back of her seat, or Tobias and then me, loudly chastised as an untrained child and a disgraceful mother)—to that man: why? Why are we doing this? And how can we make it stop—because it’s exhausting me and maybe you too, and it’s taking a lot of the joy out of being human.

It seems to me there’s a line somewhere between confronting injustice and cultivating a sense of grievance, a line between recognizing and calling out oppression in all its forms and identifying strongly with the ways we’ve each been made a victim. Something happens: right remembrance of our history—both our personal histories and our shared history—courts resentment and vengeance, such that we should always ask ourselves why we’re remembering,

toward what end our remembrance and recounting is aimed and by what spirit such reflection is energized. Why do we remember 9/11? Why are we never to forget the Holocaust? Why do we build memorials and museums and monuments? I ask such things honestly, because we can do these things full of the Holy Spirit of truth, or we can do them full of an unholy spirit—these two that can be very tricky to tell from one another.

I wonder if Jesus, when faced with that crowd, which could have been bent to his will, no problem: I wonder if he had actively to set aside any thought of Herod, any thought of John so grossly mutilated, any thought of John's sorrowing disciples and the onward march of imperial power; I wonder if he had instead (actively, prayerfully) to hold in mind simple hunger, simple human hunger. The people must eat. And he must not be the one to feed them, lest this temptation to a corrupting power continue to dog him. He would have the disciples do it, so what power was gathering to be his alone might instead become ours together.

I wonder then also what we're to set aside in order that we might serve the gospel—which is not to say we're to deny or to repress what we know is true, and is not to say we should collude with evil or to resign ourselves to social and structural sin, but is instead to recognize wrong-doing, to name it rightly, and then to set it aside that we might be partners in Christ's service, called as we are to ministries of grace.

This is an active question in my mind. I'm not preaching at you from some high and lofty place where I now transcend all grievance, all sense of injury and thirst for vengeance. I'm not that good; trust me. And I have way more fight in me than I ever realized—this I'm beginning to discover. I just pray that I fight the good fight rather than any old fight. There are so many we could choose from. Let's choose wisely and well.

Meanwhile, let's eat, feeding one another that we might taste and see that the Lord is good, gracious unto all; feeding one another that we might know how beloved we are—each and all, body and spirit.

Thanks be to God.