



AUGUST 6, 2023

**Pentecost 10**

*Matthew 14:13-21*

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*Grace and peace to you in the name of the one who calls, gathers and sends us. Amen.*

It's my privilege to be part of this year's Summer Sermon Series. I am grateful for the colleagues across this church who have contributed to this series, and to congregations and leaders who have been open to the insights and reflections that have been shared through this series. I am Deacon Michelle Collins and I serve as the Assistant to the Bishop in the Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod, where I live and work in Winnipeg.

Winnipeg is located in Treaty 1 Territory, the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. I am grateful for their stewardship of this land and am honored to live and work here as we yearn for wholeness and reconciliation for all people.

In today's gospel text, we hear another installment of Jesus' attempt to demonstrate what God is up to and how the disciples are being invited to participate in that work. The readings over the last few weeks have been parables, where Jesus uses imagery and story to try to explain the abundant, surprising expansiveness of God's heart for creation and for humanity. In today's text, rather than a parable or story that Jesus tells, we get an embodied lesson...a lesson Jesus teaches through his actions and interactions. But like the parables about the seeds and farming, Jesus points to the abundance and grace of God through the realities and particularities of human experience.

And what are those particularities? Jesus is seeking some solitude after hearing the devastating news about the execution of his cousin John the Baptist, but the crowds seek him out and are on the beach to meet him when his boat crosses the lake. So right away we feel this tension between isolation and community, between personal needs and communal expectation. In spite of his own emotional and spiritual exhaustion, Jesus sees the crowd and has compassion on them. The language here is of being moved to the gut.

What moves you to the gut? What communal need pushes past the walls of your individualism and isolationism and compels you to say “we need to do something about that...it’s not okay?” The disciples would prefer their own comfort over the burden of meeting the needs of the crowds gathered. But Jesus invites them past their desire for comfort towards God’s desire that the hungry be fed. And sure enough, through the lens of gratitude and service to God and neighbour, what little the disciples have becomes exactly what is needed to feed the hungry crowd. And there are leftovers.

This story, which is one of the few that is told by all 4 gospels, is like a kaleidoscope, where it can look different depending on how you twist and turn it. It is a story that resonates with many other significant stories in scripture. References to Jesus going off to a deserted place might take you back to stories about the wilderness. And if that’s where your mind goes, perhaps it becomes a frame through which to reflect on this story. Because the funny thing about deserted places in scripture is that it is so often in those deserted places that God shows up in ways that are a bit beyond our understanding. God’s presence is made real in those places that are described as ‘deserted.’ And when God’s presence shows up, physical and spiritual needs are met. Deserted places are spaces of want, need, scarcity, and uncertainty. And it is in those spaces where God seeks out God’s people with words and signs of hope, comfort, encouragement, and courage. God finds Hagar in her despair in the wilderness and gives her and her son a promise of inheritance and blessing. God finds Moses in the wilderness and commissions his imperfections and insecurities for the sake of deliverance and leadership. God accompanies the Israelites through the wilderness of exile, and time after time demonstrates that what they perceive as exile is in fact a season of formation and preparation. Deserted places are spaces of scarcity and uncertainty, but they are also spaces where God’s abundance and provision is manifested in tangible ways that are equally as hard to deny as they are to explain. Deserted places are exactly where God shows up.

So, what are the deserted places in your life today? What are those situations that are so overwhelming and challenging that you just want to go away into the wilderness and shut out the grief and struggle? What are those realities that feel so much more than the resources you have to face them?

This story is a kaleidoscope, and the shapes and colours shift as you turn it and look at it from a different angle. It is a story we read in a series of lessons and parables about the

kingdom of heaven, or the realm of God. Through parables about seeds, fields, trees and agriculture, I think Jesus is trying to communicate that the realm of God is not separate from the realities of daily life. The work of God is not separate from the pressures of planting seeds and wondering if the crop that grows will be sufficient. It's not disconnected from the challenge of meeting the needs of the community with diminishing resources and ensuring that everyone is provided for. In the realm of God, seeds are scattered abundantly, weeds and wheat grow together, and the whole multitude of hungry people are fed. In the realm of God, there is enough and more to go around, and the thing that feels too big is exactly the thing to which the disciples are called. In the realm of God, people are challenged and changed as they encounter one another and stay attentive to what God is doing in and through those encounters. This story is about the disciples faithfully responding to the hungry crowds as they are reminded that God cares deeply and passionately for those who are most vulnerable and that God uses them to activate that care.

Whether the miracle in this story is that the loaves and fish from the disciples somehow fed more than 5000 people, or whether the miracle is that the generosity of the disciples inspired the generosity of others...in that deserted place, both the disciples and the crowd are faced with the gap between their needs and their resources. And God's vision that all who are hungry and thirsty are nourished is made real as the disciples respond to Jesus' invitation to not turn them away, but to stay in that gap, and to give what little they have in prayer and thanksgiving. The resulting abundance is beyond anyone's imagination.

When we are in those deserted places and experiences, it's so easy to view what's possible through a lens of scarcity. As many congregations reflect on their current context after a pandemic, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the gap between resources and need. We don't have enough. The needs are too big. The deficit is too deep. We're tempted to turn away, or to turn others away, because our resources won't meet the need. This week we are invited to observe the International Day of World Indigenous People on August 9, which brings to mind the immense history of oppression and injustice that has wounded generations of people around the world and in our own neighbourhoods. This week we will be sending and praying for youth who will be gathering in Waterloo for the Canadian Lutheran and Anglican Youth Gathering, which brings to mind the layers of realities and pressures that are affecting young people around the world and in our neighbourhoods. Many congregations are facing the realities of diminished finances, volunteers, leadership energy, and vision. The inadequacy, injustice, and inequality of religious, political and civic systems and structures continues to be exposed.

The needs are big. The deficit is deep. The deserted place is that place where we are faced with the hunger that we feel incapable of feeding.

Jesus sees the crowd and is moved with compassion. He witnesses their hunger and is moved with compassion. He hears the bias and resistance of the disciples and is moved with compassion. Through Jesus, the deserted place becomes the context for God's compassion for the vulnerable and marginalized to be made known. Through Jesus and the disciples, the crowd experiences God's action of abundance. Jesus' compassion compels him to act, making the presence of God real in the midst of hunger, doubt, confusion and scarcity.

This story is a kaleidoscope, so we turn it again and let the colors and shapes shift one more time. What if we are not the disciples or the crowd in this story? What if we are the loaves and fish? What if WE—no matter our age, our size, our identifying label, our demographic, our history, or our expertise—WE are the ones that God will use to feed the hungry crowd? What if in our baptism we are blessed and sent to be part of God's renewing work of creation? What if we don't need to know HOW the crowds will be fed, but are simply invited to respond with obedience...to start with what we have and who we are, and let God multiply our resources beyond our expectations?

We know what it's like to want to escape the pain of the world by going to a deserted place. We know what it's like to want to turn away from the hunger of the crowd around us. We know what it's like to inventory our resources and acknowledge that we do not have what is needed to make a real difference.

But we also know what it's like to be washed in the waters of baptism and to hear the words, 'you are a beloved child of God.' We also know what it's like to be invited to the Lord's Table and to receive the immeasurable gift of love and forgiveness through the body and blood of Christ. We also know what it's like to be grafted into the body of Christ that stretches beyond time and boundary. We also know what it's like to be blessed beyond our expectations by the generosity and compassion of others.

In the feeding of the crowd, Jesus demonstrates to the disciples that being part of what God is up to in the world is not about protecting our resources for our own security and safety. What God is up to is discovered in following Jesus into those places where the gap between the needs of others and our resources feels insurmountable. It's discovered in obediently offering whatever we have with prayer and gratitude so that through us the hungry are fed, the sick receive care, the lonely are engulfed in community and all of us are caught up in the abundance of God's goodness and grace.