

A sermon preached on March 29th, 2020, the second Sunday in which our worship was live streamed because of the Coronavirus Pandemic. Rather than read scripture, I told the story that Matthew tells in the 14th chapter of his Gospel.

Chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel spoke to me this week as we find ourselves dealing with this pandemic. It begins with the sordid tale of King Herod's highly dysfunctional family, and the evil of his reign which leads to the execution of John the Baptist.

When Jesus receives the news that his spiritual midwife, his friend, his cousin has been murdered, he is grief stricken, heavy-hearted. His ministry has left him exhausted, and he longs to get away from the crowds to rest, to retreat, to grieve.

He remembers this beautiful, secluded spot further up the coast line of the Sea of Galilee – an inlet where the waters are calm, and there are green meadows where you can sit and feel the breeze and gaze out upon the soothing site of the waters on a summer day. So Jesus instructs his disciples to pack a picnic lunch and they launch forth together in their sail boat anticipating a day of rest and solitude.

What they don't realize is that people have watched their boat launch and have told others who in turn told others and now there is a very large crowd of people following the boat from the shoreline.

And so it comes to pass that as the crew turns their boat towards shore that this crowd of people with all their great need -- their many burdens -- comes into sight.

There is a choice Jesus must make: to turn the boat around to move on in search of another place in which to find solitude, or to keeping going towards the great crowd of people clamoring for his attention.

Jesus chooses to proceed to the shore.

I would suggest that Jesus finds himself in a spot that is familiar to many of you in this pandemic. It comes in waves, these feelings of fear, of grief, of being overwhelmed, the temptation to despair. Like Jesus you too long to withdraw, to retreat, to recline by still waters to rest and restore your souls.

But you can't do that, because there are people counting on you. Perhaps you are a parent of children or the child of aging parents who need you to hold it together. Maybe there are friends who need your comfort and connection. Perhaps your work serves some essential function that helps keep our social order from collapsing – you're a nurse, or you work in a grocery store.

Jesus chooses to proceed on towards the crowd on the shore and we are told why: he has “compassion” on them. Let’s take a moment to examine the meaning of this word. “Com” means “with” and “passion” means “suffering.” Jesus is *with* the people in their *suffering*.

In order to feel compassion for the pain of others there must be some place in our own experience where we can connect with their suffering. We know something of grief, or loneliness, or sickness of terror and so we can imagine ourselves in their situation.

Suffering comes to all of us in the course of our lives. It comes in a myriad of forms, and at this present moment in history the width and breadth of human suffering has grown quite large.

There is this basic choice that comes to us throughout our lives in relation to our own experience of suffering. We can be like a castle that pulls up the draw bridge. We can pull into ourselves and withdraw. It’s an instinctive response and sometimes for a time a necessary one.

But there is another choice, and that is to allow our pain to be a bridge of connection to others. The bridge arises from the awareness that we are all in this together. In sharing this common burden, somehow the burden is lightened.

In choosing to proceed to the shore Jesus chooses to allow his pain be a bridge of connection. He spends the day slowly moving through the crowd and his non-anxious presence is calming to the clammering fear of the crowd. Jesus touches, he teaches, he heals. His presence is contagious, not with disease but with love, with aliveness – a contagion of love and life.

Through the course of the day the spirit of the crowd shifts, letting go into the abundance of grace Jesus’ presence conveys. But there is one group of people that seems immune to this strange contagion -- Jesus’ own disciples, feeling burdened perhaps by their need to be in control of what transpires. As the crowd’s anxiety lowers, theirs seems to rise. Instead of an abundance of grace, all they can see is scarcity.

So as the sun lowers in the sky they come to Jesus with advice: *“Send these people away to the stores before they close – they need to get themselves food – and toilet paper – before the shelves are all empty!”*

But Jesus does not succumb to their anxiety of scarcity. Calmly, he looks them in the eye and says, *“You give them something to eat.”*

The disciples know this is absurd. Their picnic lunch included just five loaves of bread and two fish -- enough for a simple meal for themselves, but surely not enough for this crowd of five thousand people.

Nonetheless, Jesus has the great crowd of people sit down on the green pastures, beside the still waters. According to the Gospel writer Mark Jesus had them sit in groups of fifty -- about the number of people you might see on a typical Sunday morning in a church of our size -- small enough so that all the faces become recognizable, familiar.

Standing on a little rise where everybody can see him, Jesus takes the fish and the loaves and raises his arms to heaven in a recognizable gesture of gratitude to God for this simple meal. Witnessing this, gratitude arises within the gathered crowd as well.

Perhaps you've had similar moments during the present crisis -- times when in the midst of all the uncertainty regarding what the future holds, a profound sense of gratitude arises for the so-called "small" things in life -- things easily taken for granted.

Jesus instructs his disciples to begin passing out their modest meal to the gathered crowd of people. The people can't help but understand the implication of this act: Jesus and his disciples are sharing all they have out of sacrificial love, and the crowd is moved. People who had brought something to eat as well bring forth what they have from their satchels, offering it to the people around them. An epidemic of sharing breaks forth and the food present is enough -- it is more than enough.

At the heart of Jesus' preaching was the reality of what he called the Kingdom of Heaven. It exists fully formed in that dimension we call heaven where there is nothing but love, but it wasn't Jesus' intention that the Kingdom of Heaven would remain what we might call "other worldly." There are moments when the Kingdom of Heaven touches down on earth -- is made incarnate in flesh -- and there sitting on the grassy meadows by the lakeshore such a moment took place. It was, truly a miracle. Five thousand people who were before this largely strangers to one another experience their kinship in God's family, each caring for his or her neighbor as much as they care about themselves, experiencing the abundance, not the scarcity that is at the heart of the universe.

When all had been fed and with the sun setting, Jesus dismisses the crowds, sending them back to their homes, and they go -- their perception of reality altered by what they have experienced that day.

What Jesus does next is peculiar. He orders the disciples to get into the boat without him and to set sail in the utter darkness of the night across the Sea of Galilee with those deep, dark waters beneath them -- that primordial expression of chaos before the original creation at the start of Genesis 1. It is a scary thing for the disciples to do for sure -- but perhaps that is the point. Jesus wants them to confront their fears.

They set sail and Jesus goes up on a mountain alone, finally getting the solitude he had originally come here before. He communes in prayer with God, infused once more with the power of the Spirit.

The trip upon the dark waters that night in their little boat wasn't an easy one. The winds were against them, and they tacked to and fro, slowly making their way across the lake.

Somewhere in the deep darkness before the break of dawn, a figure of light appears on the horizon, moving towards them on the lake. At first they are frightened, imagining the figure to be that of a ghost, but as the figure draws nearer they recognize that it is Jesus walking to them on the water.

It is Simon Peter who is emboldened to imagine that Jesus' presence makes it possible for him to do something he could never have imagined. *"Jesus,"* he cries out, *"If that is really you, bid me to come to you on the water."* And Jesus said, *"Come."*

Peter steps out of the safety of that boat and for a few, brief shining moments he experiences the glorious freedom from fear that is our birthright as God's children. He is walking on the waters of chaos to Jesus.

But then the winds pick up, the fear returns, and Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus to focus his attention on the wind. He begins to sink – down into the dark waters of chaos and destruction. He cries out to Jesus, *"Lord, save me!"* and Jesus reaches out his hand to lead Peter back into the safety of the boat.

This is a good story to return to in this time of uncertainty. We are a mixture of faith and fear, and there will surely be times when fear comes upon us like a wave, and we may feel like we are sinking back down into those deep, dark waters of chaos. In turning our gaze back towards Jesus, the one who leads us through the darkness of the cross and into the light of resurrection, we will make our way safely home. Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute we are called to choose to turn from fear to faith. The instinct to withdraw into ourselves will come, but Jesus calls us to find in our pain a bridge of compassion that connects us with the pain of others, and as we do, we lighten together the load.

Keep returning your eyes to Jesus walking on the waters of chaos and uncertainty. Keep making the choice to put your trust in God. We are in this together.

Eyes on Jesus. Trust the abundance. We will stumble like Peter, but Jesus is there to catch us. Keep turning our eyes back on Jesus.

And choose to let your pain be a bridge.