

“The Spirit’s Second Wind”

Isaiah 40:27-31; Matthew 14:13-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 2, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to your Spirit’s reviving compassion and persevere in living out the gospel. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Back in 2010, my congregation in Anniston, Alabama, hosted a what our Region and many others called a “Miracle Day”. Ours was in conjunction with our 125th anniversary, though that wasn’t always the case. The general idea is that folks from all around a Region come together at one church and do a ridiculous amount of work in one day to strengthen that congregation’s ministry. At Miracle Day 2010, we painted the entire sanctuary and the window frames all around the outside of the building. We turned a weird little empty lot across the alley into a beautiful prayer garden, complete with a ramp to make it accessible. And we refurbished the playground. There was worship, and child care, and of course, lunch! It was indeed rather miraculous. But if I’m honest, it wasn’t just a “Day”. The planning for that event started about a year before it was held. There were lots and lots of meetings and sub-committees and lists.

I bring all this up because I think that the “Feeding of the Way More Than 5000” as we really should call it is one of our favorite miracles in the Bible. And maybe because of that, we tend to drill down into the details of the miracle itself – the five loaves and two fish, the boy who offered them that only John’s gospel mentions,

the fact that this is the one miracle that shows up in all four gospels – but we rarely step back and look at the context. And the context might hold the best lesson for us in August 2020.

The passage we read tells us what had happened earlier. Jesus was trying to get away to a deserted place, but the crowds followed him. And when he saw them, “he had compassion for them and cured their sick.” And apparently, that went on until evening. That right there would be enough for us to understand that Jesus must have already been exhausted. But there’s more.

In the version of this story that Matthew and Mark tell, it happens immediately after Jesus has found out that John the Baptizer has been beheaded by Herod – John his cousin, John his herald, John the one who baptized him in the Jordan River. Let’s pause there a moment. If you’ve been baptized, I want you to stop a moment and think about the person who baptized you. Say their name, in your heart or actually out loud. Do you know if that person is still living? If not, do you remember hearing the news of their passing? Maybe you haven’t been baptized yet, or weren’t particularly close to the person who baptized you, or completely lost touch with them. But maybe you have a cousin you’re close to, who is no longer with us. Or maybe the chaos and grief that have laid their numbing, draining hands over our land in the last few months are enough to help us imagine the sorrow that gripped Jesus when he heard of John’s death, causing him to want to withdraw to a deserted place by himself for a while.

That is the context in which Jesus was faced with a needy, hurting crowd and had enough compassion to spend the entire afternoon healing them of diseases and then provide a feast for dinner right there in wilderness. I would argue that this is a double miracle story. The loaves and fishes are hardly even the most impressive part. The fact that Jesus stayed with the crowd at all, instead of getting back in his boat and heading in the opposite direction is the kind of miracle we read about in Isaiah 40, in which the God gives the faint power and renews their strength so that they can “mount up with wings like eagles.”

Is there anything more exhausting than grief? If you’ve been wondering why you feel so tired all the time, it’s because we’ve been inundated with grief for months on end now. The grief of isolation, of losing the activities and gatherings that refresh our hearts. The grief of our nation teetering on the edge of chaos, irreparable division, and fascism. The grief of losing our capacity to plan ahead, our sense that we knew what to expect, our illusions of control over our lives. And of course, the grief of death: 561 dead in San Diego County as of Thursday, over 150,000 across the country, almost a quarter of the world’s deaths. Meanwhile, the regular toll of death is still happening alongside the pandemic, and families are grieving in isolation because physical gatherings are too risky. It’s no wonder we’re tired.

How can God possibly expect us to still feed the hungry and clothe the naked and proclaim good news with the oppressed in the face of this exhausting grief? Could we dare to hope for our own double miracles? Can we center our hearts on

waiting for the Lord, the everlasting God, Creator of the ends of the earth, so that our strength might be renewed and our capacity for compassionate action revived?

I would be the first one to tell you that despite the fact that we spent a year planning Miracle Day 2010, there is no way it would have succeeded if it hadn't been for God's work in our midst. The entire time, we were quite clear that our tiny little church had bitten off way more than we could chew. But girded by the partnership of our fellow Alabama-Northwest Florida congregations, we were able to muster up the faith to believe that God was going to see us through. And God did! Taking such risks and stepping out with nothing but trust in God is one of the ways we build up our faith, so that the risk is easier next time. Oftentimes, like with Jesus in this story from Matthew 14, we do not have the luxury of lead-time, a year to plan, or even any notice of what it is we will be called to respond to tomorrow. We may know in our bones that the best thing for us right now is time away, a moment to not have to think about the weight of the world's grief, a chance to catch our breath. But then a need emerges right in front of us.

It's God's Spirit of Compassion that takes over at that point. Our God-given capacity to suffer with others who are in pain helps us dig into reserves of energy we didn't know we had. This is not a call to burn-out, but an invitation to not underestimate our own power when we're tuned into the power of God. That crowd was needy, there is no doubt. But it's also clear that by evening, having received the healing blessings of Jesus' compassion, that many of the people in that crowd helped

make that second miracle happen. Way more than 5000 people don't get fed without lots of people helping pass the baskets of bread and fish. Compassion is contagious! The Spirit's second wind will spread quicker than we can track it, as long as we aren't blocking it. And when it does, miracles, double miracles, triple miracles will be breaking out all around us.

In our exhaustion, in our grief and our frustration and boredom and loneliness, it is essential that we make time to center our hearts on waiting on our everlasting God who does not faint or grow weary. When we open our hearts to the Spirit of Compassion, tremendous things become possible. Not only can hungry people be fed and lonely people comforted. But we ourselves can be lifted up on wings like eagles' in ways we couldn't have imagined. Beloved, let us wait on the Lord, for God is faithful and will not leave us on our own. Hallelujah and Amen!