



Roanoke, Virginia
Stewardship Commitment Sunday
October 11, 2020

“What We Fled Has Found Us”

Matthew 14:13-21

George C. Anderson

In the summer of 2019, several of us went to Montreat for a *Stewardship Conference*. At the conference, Rev. Steve Eason led a study on our passage from Matthew. When I heard it, I knew that I wanted to preach on this passage on Commitment Sunday. I stuck to that decision even though it interrupts our “Catching Up With the Spirit” sermon series on the book of Acts.

You can hear this passage in two ways. First, you can hear it from the perspective of the crowd, which represents the world’s needs, or maybe even as a member of the crowd with your own personal needs. The second way you can hear it is from the perspective of the disciples who, with Jesus, have to deal with the crowd and its many needs. Though we should hear this story both ways, this sermon listens with the ears of the disciples... the ears of the church.

So, taking a break from the series, listen for the Word of God in this reading from Matthew 14:13-21.

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, 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. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When 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.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five



loaves and 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. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Crowds can *wear you out*.

On the very first mission trip to the Dominican Republic, my friend Dr. Joe Duckwall was part of a team that would ride to a remote barrio and see everyone who needed something from a doctor. It could be as minor as a check-up, or it could be treatment for a more serious condition. There were larger crowds back then and every day, Joe, a pediatrician, would see over a hundred people—one time over 200—and most of them children. It was rewarding, but also *exhausting*, work.

Meanwhile, most days I would spend at a school. I'd play with the kids at recess and that was a lot of fun. But most of what I would do is go from classroom to classroom and simply have conversation with the children for the better part of an hour so that they could practice their English. Here's the problem: their English was poor, and my Spanish was non-existent. So, for the better part of an hour, we had to try to carry a conversation, accompanied by the aerobics of sign language and facial expressions... and yes, I made the classic mistakes of speaking louder thinking that somehow that made me more intelligible and... well, this is embarrassing to admit... I would find myself *speaking English with a Dominican accent*. I didn't mean to do it, but maybe my desperate intuition was telling me that since the translators were making sense speaking English with a Dominican accent, I would make sense too.

So, while I loved the kids and we had a great time at recess, I can't say that my classroom teaching was as rewarding as Joe's medical work in the barrios; his work was more effective. But I *can* say it was exhausting. And I keep telling Joe that even though he keeps teasing me about spending my days playing with children. I've told him—and this is true—that when I have spent long days in the hot sun on Dominican construction sites, it is not nearly as draining as carrying on those conversations with all those kids in those classrooms. He doesn't believe me, but if you teachers out there who are teaching both online and on site would give me an "Amen," I'd appreciate it.

Joe was healing, I was teaching; both with crowds and it was exhausting.

That is where Jesus is at the beginning of our passage; worn out, needing a break, needing time alone... to think, to pray, to recover.

And why? Well, the previous two chapters tell us why. Jesus has been carrying both Joe's load and mine. He has been healing and he has been teaching. And because so many people seek his healing and teaching, the crowds kept growing.

And to make the experiences even more exhausting, whenever he heals something or teaches something, someone is around who needs to criticize him.

- He heals a man with a withered hand and some Pharisees want to know why he's working on the Sabbath.



- He casts an unclean spirit out of a man and more Pharisees question if he is using Satan’s power.
- He teaches in his hometown synagogue and folks refuse to listen because they knew him when he was a kid.

And I’m not finished. Right before our passage—you heard it alluded to in the very first phrase of the passage—Jesus learns that his cousin is dead. Actually, killed! John the Baptist, his cousin and companion in the cause of justice, had lived this long because King Herod was himself intimidated by the crowds, but then finally kept a promise and had John executed with his head brought to him on a platter.

Too much. Enough is enough. Those Pharisees had a point; we need our Sabbath rest, and to get away from the crowd, to stop doing and simply be. Jesus gets in a boat and crosses the Sea of Galilee to find a deserted place. He’s not backing down; he is just taking a break.

But what he has fled, finds him.

Actually, what he has fled is *waiting* for him. The crowd is waiting for him on the beach. Jesus again takes compassion and ministers to them.

This is where we learn that this story is not only about Jesus’ exhaustion, but also the exhaustion of the disciples. It turns out that when Jesus escapes to the other side, so do they; and when the crowd finds Jesus, the crowd finds them. And the disciples are the ones who simply have no more to give.

They let Jesus know it. “[Send them away](#),” they ask him.

Well, they don’t say it like that. They are *not heartless* after all. They couch their request in compassion. These folks are still hungry for parables and healing, and now, with evening approaching, they are hungry for food. So, what the disciples ask is that Jesus not just make them go away but send them to the villages where they can get some food.

I find this to be a very relatable story. I mean, look at the crowds with their needs all around us now.

- So many who need food, work, shelter, asylum.
- I’ve read *Dopesick* and, wow, the statistics about opioid abuse in southwest Virginia are staggering.
- Look at the crowds protesting
 - and look at the violence that sometimes breaks out.
- We are told that some problems like racism are systemic.
 - How do we move from systemic to solved?
- We are in the middle of a pandemic where separation is a solution
 - and in the middle of a polarizing election where separation is a problem.
- And we’ve read the stories about the dangers to
 - our planet,



- our economy,
- our democracy.

So we pray, “Holy God, here are the problems and our hearts are broken. Can you send the problems to where they can be solved?”

All that I just went over, the litany of overwhelming problems—that was *Exhaustion* talking. The truth is that the crowd is not just about needs but also about so many things to be celebrated.

- Many have heard what Jesus has said
 - and it has given them hope and direction
 - and they have told others who then want to come hear Jesus.
- People have been healed,
 - and one reason the crowd has swelled is that their families and friends have come to express their thanks.

The disciples who are overwhelmed by the crowds are also those who have been overcome by the vision Jesus has given them and the direction he has given their lives.

And in our world, though it is hard to hear the noise of bad news or see past the many disturbing media images, there is everywhere happening words and gestures of genuine kindness, care and concern. It’s like talking about the larger church’s issues and missing how much is being done by this congregation to grow community and meet human needs. It is like talking about the problems of our nation and missing how so much is being done by so many to find common ground and show shared commitment and compassion in addressing the nation’s issues.

But exhaustion doesn’t think that way. Sometimes the worst conclusions are drawn and the worst decisions made when we are worn out. So, exhausted and overwhelmed, the disciples are not in the mood to see that this may be a moment in time when crowds are listening, healing is happening, and the world is changing... with so much potential for it to change for the better. They can’t see how filled with potential for salvation is this moment they have with Jesus. They just see the needs and they want Jesus to deal with it. “Jesus, it’s starting to get dark, these people are hungry, please send them to villages so they can get something to eat.”

Notice that Jesus doesn’t get upset with the disciples’ request. There is nothing wrong with prayers that admit to God that we have more than we can bear and we need to place our burdens on him. Tired as he is, Jesus accepts the responsibility of doing what the disciples cannot do on their own.

But prayer is a conversation, and Jesus has an answer that the disciples did not expect. “All right,” Jesus says, “I’ll do something, but I’m going to need your help. Give them something to eat.”

“Give them something to eat?” There are 5000 men! Not counting women and children! “How much do you have?” asks Jesus.

The disciples look in their bags and give the answer that should end the discussion: “Five loaves and two fish.”



“Well,” Jesus says, “let’s see what we can do with that.”

And then, somehow, the crowds get fed. It is not that all their needs are solved, and we know that this problem is not solved forever. They will grow hungry again. Still, this evening, everyone is fed.

How does it happen?

Well, we can see it as a miracle. Jesus takes five loaves and two fish, says a blessing and somehow multiplies what he has so that everyone is fed with leftovers to spare. But if we simply see it is God’s miracle, have we not found yet another way to take ourselves out of the response leaving everything to Jesus?

Let’s look again at what Jesus does. He gets everyone’s attention and, in Mark’s telling, has them sit together in smaller groups... small enough so they can see each other. Then he says a blessing over what the disciples have shared with him and asks them to serve the crowd. The only way to serve the crowd, though, is

person-by-person,
face-to-face,
dealing with each person and smaller group one at a time.

It is like within the big church, the Sunday School class, or prayer group, or mission team, or even a committee—you get to know each other’s names and lives and it becomes easier to be there for each other.

And what do you think happens when you are in small groups and someone begins to share with them? It is easy to imagine that they look in their own bags to see what they have. Yes, some are empty handed in this moment, but some have enough for themselves and more to spare.

“Here’s a loaf.” “Here’s some fish.” In other words, it turns out that the crowd doesn’t just have needs, *it has resources*. And when they are given the right kind of inspiration, they become part of the solution of their shared problems. As Rev. Eason said in his Bible study, “*within the crowd there is the ability to help... but they need to be led.*”

My friends, I began this sermon saying that there are two perspectives from which to view this passage:

as the crowd with needs
and as the disciples who, with Jesus, are expected to deal with the crowd’s needs.

Well, lo and behold, the crowd and the disciples are alike. The disciples are overwhelmed and want the crowd to go away, and the crowd has needs that they want Jesus to meet but, in the end, with God’s help, they all have problems and they all have ways to face those problems together. Maybe

- those who have issues with each other have within themselves the ability to reconcile,
- those who are hurting can help with each other’s healing,
- those who have hungers have ways they can join others to make sure all are fed.



That is the picture of the church, isn't it? That's Second Presbyterian Church, isn't it? Today is Commitment Sunday, and we are being asked to look in our bags and see what we can share so that together we can address our hungers and needs.

- We who come to church to ask for God's blessings have blessings to share.
- We who come with heartfelt prayers that God take on burdens we cannot bear on our own have ways we can share burdens together.
- We, the hungry, can help in feeding.

We'll have to take our eyes off the whole crowd sometimes and focus on those who are immediately around us—see their faces, learn their needs... and also what they have to offer. Then, together, we can start doing what we can with what we have.

Start? Goodness, we started already. That is something else we might miss when we are overwhelmed. We might miss

- the education and fellowship opportunities that form groups of people who can care for each other,
- the visitation of the homebound and the compassion for the sick and grieving,
- the families who have been given shelter,
- the students at Highland Park who have been tutored,
- the incredible progress made in San Juan.

Not to mention, how the church refused to be overwhelmed by this pandemic but found ways to continue being a worshipping, justice-discerning, caring, and serving church.

That's the miracle of the church. We might like to go to church sometimes as an escape to a deserted place where we can get away from the world's problems and focus on our needs. Then we find that what we have fled has found us... but also what we have fled can help feed us.

So, I know you are hungry. But let's look at what we all have and can share, and it will be amazing how many more besides us will be able to eat.

