

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

The 'feeding of the five thousand' is all the more miraculous when we view it through the lens of Jesus' trauma and see it as a collective response of the human spirit.

Text

'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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.'

Comment

The violent and unjust death affects Jesus deeply. He takes a boat and withdraws from his work. He gets away from his friends because he wants to be alone. Matthew doesn't tell us why Jesus comes back when he does or how long he's been away. The text doesn't suggest that he's any less traumatised by John's death when he returns. But when he returns, the great crowd of people – who have also heard of John's death – are waiting for him. The violent and unjust death that affected Jesus has affected them, as well. Unlike with Jesus, however, we find them not heading into isolation but moved to collective action. The death of John has not silenced their desire for a saviour; Herod's abuse of power and disregard of justice have instead increased their demand for something better. Calls for change have multiplied.

Jesus, having spent time alone, now finds himself in the midst of this hungry crowd. He responds to their needs, showing compassion and curing their sick. He also seems to acknowledge their potency, for when his disciples point out the lack of food and the late hour, Jesus indicates that a hidden supply is available. 'They need

not go away; you give them something to eat.’

What happens next is either an example of Jesus’ divine powers or a very tangible display of collective human response. Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish from the disciples, blesses them and breaks the loaves, and gives them back to the disciples – who then give them to the crowds. All eat and are filled. It’s a miracle. There’s even more food at the end than there was at the start. Within the context of Jesus’ trauma, however, a miracle of multiplication occurred even before the loaves were broken. Jesus can now see that Herod cannot staunch the movement that John embodied by killing him. Even in a deserted place, even when supplies are not evident, even when the hour is late – the means are present to feed the hungry, to respond with power to injustice, and to engage with others in solidarity and compassion. John’s death affects Jesus; so does the life of the crowd.

Response

Matthew’s narrative includes Jesus’ own emotional processing in isolation as well as evidence of a widespread turn in public engagement. As we process the trauma of a global pandemic, as well as individual episodes of violence and injustice in our societies, this passage calls us to consider what resources we may bring as part of a collective response. Unlike Jesus, we will not be able to multiply a little into a miraculous surplus – but like members of the crowd, we can respond to new and ongoing examples of injustice and violence with demands for something better, and commit ourselves in this time of need with public displays of solidarity.

Whether we find ourselves in a time of voluntary or unwanted isolation this week, we can and should reflect on our part to play in a larger story – and reconsider what we can offer from our own supply to a collective response. The hour is late; a hunger is growing, but the crowd need not go away disappointed. You give them something to eat.

Prayer

God of private reflection,
God of collective response:
be with us as we withdraw
into the time we need alone
with sadness, anger and confusion.
Then be with us as we regroup
to face the world that is.
May the will we have be a part
of something greater still
transform the little one can offer
into a feast we all can share.
Amen.

Further Reading

