Year A Proper 13 8.2.26

Offering up our "not enough" The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

Today's Gospel begins with a broken heart and emptiness and ends with broken bread and hearts that are full.

It helps to know what comes right before today's Gospel from the 14th chapter of Matthew. Before we have the feeding of the 5000, we have the traumatic story of the murder of John the Baptist by Herod, the ruler of Galilee. Herod had arrested John for criticizing him for getting divorced so he could marry his brother's wife. Then on a whim he had John beheaded at the request of his new wife at the end of Herod's own birthday party.

That story ends with this sentence: John's disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.

This is why today's Gospel begins: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

Consider for a moment what that boat ride was like for him – I imagine Jesus scared and horrified and grieving and just done. And so, he seeks out a deserted place where he can be alone with his Abba and grieve and grieve. Recall that Jesus went to the wilderness just after his baptism by John. And now he's headed out again to be alone.

But his Abba has other plans.

Because the crowd has heard where Jesus is going, and they head out after him. Because they want what Jesus has – they want healing and feeding and they want the Word of God that Jesus brings them. They are hungry and thirsty – and they are coming to the water and lining up for the meal, just like Isaiah told them to do in today's first reading. They come out from the villages, and they gather on the shore just as Jesus pulls up in his boat. They fill the beach -- 5000 families.

What must Jesus be feeling as he sees this throng waiting for him at what he thought was a secluded site? I know what I'd be feeling. If it were me, I'd turn that boat right there and find an even more secluded spot.

But Jesus looks at this crowd and he feels -- compassion. Their suffering cuts right through his own. I wonder if they remind him of the crowd that had come out to see John on the banks of the Jordan when all of Israel went to be baptized by him, Jesus among them. John who said to Jesus "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John who dwelt in secluded places and spoke truth to power and got himself killed.

I wonder if that's partly why Jesus got out of that boat and started healing the people on the shore -- because of John.

When the twelve caught up with him that evening, he'd been at it all day. I wonder if by then his disciples were also done – some of them had been John's followers originally. They too were grieving and shocked and tired, and I imagine they too wanted to be alone with Jesus. Send the

crowd back to where they came from to find something to eat, they suggested. Maybe they were being practical. Maybe they were being selfish. I could see myself making that very suggestion for both those reasons.

And here's my favorite part of the story: Jesus says to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

And they answer honestly: "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." We do not have enough.

This is what this story is about for me: that moment when you face the surprise guests, the unanticipated expectation, the impossible last-minute request, the thing that someone else got you into – and what you have isn't enough. Do you know that feeling? Can you locate it in the pit of your stomach?

In these miraculous feeding stories, it's tempting to go straight to the cinematic moment, to the amazing cascade of bread and fish that plays out like a combination of Manna in the desert and the last supper. But let's slow it down a bit. Let's pause at this moment when there is clearly not enough. What does Jesus do?

Jesus takes those loaves and fishes. Then he hands them to God. Then he hands them back to the disciples. And they give them to the crowd.

Somewhere in that silent prayer, in that blessing and breaking, feeding all those people is no longer Jesus' lone responsibility, or the disciples' lone responsibility. It's God's responsibility. And God responds by expanding the gift and strengthening the giver. The disciples distribute what is given back to them, and they clean up the leftovers.

This is how Jesus does it. In the gospels, Jesus always arrives with everything he has. Sometimes it doesn't seem like very much. Other people feed him and clothe him and house him. On the one hand, he arrives empty. On the other hand, he always offers everything he has. Perhaps this is why in the depths of his own loss, he can attend to person after person on that beach.

Throughout the Scriptures Jesus will insist over and over again that any power he has, any wonder he works or Word he proclaims, comes from his Abba. And his disciples will be expected to do the same thing.

This is a particular comfort to me, and something I need to remember every single day of these complex and demanding times. Even when I bring everything I have, I will never arrive with enough. I'm not expected to. That doesn't mean that I'm to hold back, reserve a nice portion for my own lunch before contributing to the divine banquet. But it does mean that I keep my gifts and my role and my readiness in a particular perspective.

I understand that Pope John the 23rd 's nightly prayer was something like "It's your church, Lord, I'm going to bed."

Often my prayer goes something like this: "Oh God, I don't have enough to respond. So please fill in the gaps with your grace, your wisdom and your love. Your friend, Barb."

This is what Jesus wanted his disciples to be able to do – to let go of their own limitations long enough to allow God to take over. This is the small print in our great commission. The disciples -- and by translation us as church -- do not get to be the crowd on the beach, waiting for the heavenly banquet to be served. Nor are we the ones who throw the party.

We are the wait staff.

Oh we're still hungry, and mourning, and in need of healing – just like everyone else in the crowd. But our job is to start serving up whatever Jesus hands us from the Father. We get to eat the left-overs – and there will be great left overs. That's our side of the covenant we've made to God – we serve at the divine banquet. We make ourselves entirely available to the healing, transforming, world-remaking just and merciful power of God.

The great Civil Rights warrior John Lewis, who encouraged people to "get in good trouble" was laid to rest six years ago, July 30.

In Lewis' own words, which he arranged to have published the day of his funeral, you can almost hear Jesus explaining to his disciples why he asked them not to send that hungry, hurting crowd away empty.

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

Amen.