

Our Gospel lesson this morning has a rather abrupt beginning. There are 5 transitional words that were edited out of the Gospel book. That usually happens whenever a lesson starts with a transition. The full text begins, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

The problem with reading isolated chunks of scripture is that we're always not aware of the context, of what precedes and follows the reading. So if it says, "Now when Jesus heard this," it's important to look back at what has just happened.

What Jesus had just heard was that John the Baptist had been killed at Herod's birthday banquet. You may remember the story. Salome is both Herod's stepdaughter and niece. She dances for Herod. Herod is so inflamed by lust for his young stepdaughter/niece that he promises her anything, even half his kingdom. Her mother suggests that she ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. John has been railing against her and Herod being married, since she was Herod's sister-in law. So Herod has John beheaded and present the head to Salome as she has asked.

So when Jesus hears this sad news, he withdraws in a boat to a deserted place. That's a very natural human reaction, to want some space to oneself to reflect and pray and grieve after the death of a loved one. But Jesus doesn't get the time he needs. Because when he lands, he finds that a crowd has followed him. Yet Jesus doesn't say, 'Leave me alone, go home.' He has compassion on the crowd, and he heals their sick.

But then, it's evening. Jesus, the disciples, and the crowd are in a deserted place together. The disciples tell Jesus, 'Hey, Lord, it's suppertime. You'd better send all these people back to the nearest village to find food.'

But surprisingly, Jesus says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

The disciples say, 'But we only have five loaves of bread and two fish.'

Jesus says, "Bring them here to me."

And then, Matthew tells us, "(Jesus took) 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 you know the rest. Everybody ate until they were satisfied, 5,000 men, not to mention women and children. And there were even 12 baskets of leftovers.

The feeding of the 5,000 is a miraculous meal. The feeding of the 5,000 is an example of God's magnificent love providing for the needs of his people.

The feeding of the 5,000 also points to 4 other meals in the Bible. Three had already taken place, and the other was still to come.

The first meal this feeding contrasts with is the meal immediately preceding it: Herod's birthday banquet. Herod's banquet was characterized by lust, and greed, and vindictiveness. Herod's banquet eventually ended in death, in the beheading of John the Baptist. By contrast, Jesus' banquet is characterized by compassion. Jesus' banquet is life giving, and life sustaining.

The second meal is 1,200 years earlier, dating back to the time of Moses. In the wilderness, the people of Israel were sustained with Manna, the daily bread from heaven, and with meat, the quail sent into their camp. Just as God fed the people in the wilderness with bread and quail, Jesus feeds the 5,000 with bread and fish.

The third meal is found in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of 2 Kings. In a time of famine, the prophet Elisha miraculously feeds 100 people with only 20 loaves of bread. But by contrast, Jesus feeds 100 times more people with less than a quarter of the amount of bread Elisha used. The point is, Jesus is greater than the prophets who have come before.

The fourth meal the feeding of the 5,000 points to is one we remember every Sunday: the Last Supper, the sacrament of Communion.

Notice what Jesus does with the loaves and fishes. Matthew says, "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." Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives. These same four actions were repeated at the last supper: taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. We repeat these 4 actions every time we celebrate communion. We take bread and wine and set them aside during the offertory. We bless them in the Eucharistic prayer. Afterwards we break the bread, and then, under normal circumstances, we give it to everyone. Taking, blessing, breaking, and giving.

The feeding of the 5,000 is a wonderful reminder of God's love for us. Like the people with Jesus in that deserted place, God will take care of our needs.

We're in a tough time of pandemic. Spiritually we're in a rather deserted place. And yet, we trust that God is still active.

Like the 5 loaves and 2 fish, God can take the small things we do, the small things we offer, and God can multiply them beyond our wildest beliefs. We offer things like our time, our talents, our treasure. Sometimes what we do may seem insignificant, especially in a deserted place.

But our Gospel reminds us that to offering given to God with thanksgiving is too small to be used. After all, God takes seeds and turns them into plants. God takes cells and turns them into new creatures. This God can take what little we give and transform it into an abundant gift for the world.

It's not always easy. The seed dies before it becomes a new plant. The bread is broken before it can be shared. But out of death, and out of brokenness, God can bring bountiful results.

The results may not be what we expect. After all, I doubt that the disciples, after the feeding of the 5000, would be expecting Jesus to walk on water, which we'll hear about next week.

The results may even come in spite of our opposition. The people in the wilderness complained before they received manna. The disciples were ready to send the people away before Jesus fed them. Yet in spite human failings and human opposition, God produced marvelous bounty for his people.

God can do more for us than we can dream for ourselves. In this difficult season, in your spiritual deserted places, remember that.

God's love for us is greater than we can imagine. Nothing can stand in the way of that love.