

## THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT BAD NEWS

Reflection by Rev. Hubert Den Draak, Feb. 24, 2019

Scripture passage: Matthew 14:13-33



Earlier this week I was at the Mosque next door to discuss the space we'll be using there this Saturday, and I bumped into the Imam, Abdallah. I'd met with him before, he's probably in his early thirties, not old, but the first thing I noticed was he seemed... older somehow.

When I got home I heard of course the news of the horrific fire that claimed the lives of 7 beautiful children of a Syrian refugee family who had arrived here less than 2 years ago. They attended the Ummah Mosque next door. And then I understood why Abdallah looked older that day. He was still trying to come to grips with devastating news, while having to respond to requests for help, respond to offers to help, respond to the media, and to respond to questions that are impossible to answer.

I think the way we respond to bad news reveals a lot about ourselves, our character, our personality.

Some of us feel we need to fix what happened, even when it's unfixable (which most really bad news is). They want to help, do something, donate money, clothes, food, anything to make things better.

Others feel totally victimized and are almost paralyzed, unable to think or act.

Some push away all kinds of help or support, while others throw themselves into anybody's arms.

Some will turn inward, needing to be by themselves for a while to think it through – while others keep themselves as busy as possible so they *don't* have to think about it. Different ways for different people responding to the same bad news.

Today we hear good news in the way Jesus responds - to bad news. Being human, Jesus had *his* share of bad news, and here is an opportunity to see how *he* responds to it, giving us a glimpse of *his* character.

Just before this passage, Matthew writes about King Herod's out-of-control feast at his palace, in which John the Baptist got beheaded just to satisfy somebody's whim. It's a pointless, senseless death.

Jesus has just heard this awful news of the killing of his cousin and friend, who baptized him, and Matthew tells us that his response to it is to withdraw from the crowds in a boat to be by himself in a deserted place. We're not told why or how he left, or how he felt – all we are told is he needed to be alone.

But after his boat ride across the lake, what is waiting for Jesus at the other side? A great crowd... A *great* crowd. Some 5000 men, says Matthew, and some say, well, there also must have been many women with those men, add the kids – we're talking anywhere between 10 to 20,000 people. A lot of people. And they've all heard of the cruel death of their beloved prophet John. They are there because they're upset and want to hear what Jesus has to say about it. So they follow him – on foot – from their homes and towns to where ever Jesus is going, just to hear his thoughts and somehow make sense of this senseless murder.

How is Jesus going to respond to all these people's needs? Jesus who is grieving himself, grieving the murder of his cousin, his friend and mentor John. And what will his response reveal about him to us?

He could face them like the celebrity he was and lash out at them the way celebrities can lash out at the paparazzi – "Get out of my face!". "Give me some space here!"

Or he could just climb back into his boat and go somewhere else where the crowd couldn't get, just to get away from them. "Sorry folks, but now is not a good time. Maybe later."

In this character-defining moment Jesus responds to this huge crowd – with love. Or as Matthew says, with compassion. With healing, and then with sustenance. With grace. And eventually a call.

He realizes that this is not about him, it much bigger than his personal grief. And so his response is to make himself available, even when the timing couldn't be worse.

Jesus is ready for the 5,000-plus people who are upset and angry and bewildered. This is a community that has come together to mourn, to question, to talk with Jesus. They gather together as one body. That's how communities respond to devastating news that affects everyone, be it 2000 years ago or this week. We saw it happen here in Halifax, at Wednesday night's vigil, mourning the loss of the 7 children, and the funeral yesterday.

This story of Jesus feeding the 5000 is usually remembered as a miracle story, focussing on how it reveals Jesus' divine powers. Multiplying the bread and fish, feeding thousands with them, walking on water are big, bold statements that make you go "Wow, only God's own son can do that, only Jesus is that powerful! Powerful enough to feed and heal thousands of people, to walk on water and calm a ferocious storm."

And of course that *is* part of it, only don't get distracted by it, because this story has so much more going on than what you see at first glance. And a big chunk of it is driven by... shared sorrow and the need to grieve together.

In the aftermath of John's murder, Jesus and this crowd *come together* in their sorrow. And notice what Jesus does NOT tell them. He doesn't say, "Friends, this time Herod

has crossed the line, this we cannot tolerate! It's time to get even, it's time to revolt." Nothing like that.

He doesn't even try to explain this away, he doesn't try to give it some purpose or meaning. "This was meant to happen. God gives and God takes. God has called John home. When God closes a door..." None of that drivel. Instead, he has com-*passion* for them, he feels *with* them. All he does is *be* with them and offer spiritual & physical healing, and sustenance.

The simple banquet that Jesus offers them, where everyone is cared for, is the polar opposite of Herod's power-drunk banquet. One is over the top, with too much posturing and drink and food, full of jaded people, power games and ambition. The other is full of real need, and also overflowing – but with Jesus' abundant compassion. Contrasting feasts by contrasting powers.

That is what underlies the miracle that follows. The miracle of the gifts a community provides for its individuals. God's power is present within the community that gathers around Jesus – *any* community that gathers around Jesus. Not to be fed easy answers, not to complain, not to rush into action or retribution – but to be reminded that *God's* power and justice and peace and abundance will prevail in this world.

Experiencing an excruciating loss like the death of John the Baptist, or the 7 children in a fire, or any kind of painful loss can leave you feeling empty. So no wonder that after Matthew shows us the vital importance of being in community, he continues to show how Jesus fills all empty spaces. The crowd certainly felt lost and empty, something many of us can empathize with this week.

And Matthew uses a very concrete example to show how Jesus addresses emptiness. The crowd has empty stomachs, they're at an empty place – with just a few loaves of bread and some fish.

And Matthew says, "And all ate as much as they wanted". They all were filled and satisfied. *That's* what this story leads up to, that's the punch line of this story. That's the Good News for all of us.

We have a God who is willing to just be with us in times of despair and grief and loss, and simply hold us and offer healing at all times; that alone is a big deal. But even more than that, Jesus shows us that this God will also feed and fill us – and not just a little bit but extravagantly, with more than enough for everyone, literally everyone (the number 12 in the Torah, the twelve baskets of left over bread, is always symbolic for "everyone", "the world").

Maybe bad news has emptied you of faith or hope, or of purpose or energy, or the ability to trust, or love... Maybe the tragic death of these 7 children have triggered old pain of devastating loss and emptiness in *your* life. Lean on Jesus, says Matthew, and you will be filled. You are not alone. That's what

Jesus is about. And once filled, we get to share that with others. That's the whole idea behind our "sharing the Peace of Christ" every single Sunday. What is given to us we should share. Once we are fed, we will feed others. That's also what Jesus is about.

Jesus fills and feeds us every time we meet in his name, even when it kills him, even when he feeds us with his own body and blood. How can we keep that for ourselves? But too often we take it for granted; we have our fill, we go home all satisfied – and we leave the leftovers to go stale.

Maybe you have a worship experience that's very meaningful for you, or you experience a profound encounter or conversation while doing outreach work at Manna for Health or Brunswick Street, or when working with the children and youth; maybe somebody called you or looked you up just when you needed it – and it just didn't occur to us to share that with others, to pay it forward.

Last week we talked about how God does not forget what we do to further God's dream for this world, even when others do forget or don't notice. This week I'm telling you that God will not forget even the smallest, littlest gesture that feeds others, often with results that we will never know or understand.

You're probably familiar with the term "the butterfly effect". It comes from large-system chaos theory like weather patterns, and it means that a tiny, insignificant event like that of a flapping of a wing by a butterfly can trigger a tornado somewhere else. In other words, a tiny change can have massive consequence. Everything is connected on a fundamental level.

Small acts of generosity, of being with someone in ways that are nourishing to them in ways fill an emptiness, can affirm and heal others in ways you never dreamed of. So who are *you* called to nourish with your faith and your gifts? And who are *we* called, as St. John's, to nourish and heal as a community of faith?

Maybe we should make this passage as our guideline for the next few months as we figure out a concrete way how to be church in this community. It would be a good reminder of the question we should continually be asking ourselves: how can we best *be* with others around us, and heal, support and nourish them *and* each other? How can we best be Christ-like for others?

Being church is not about the bottom line, it's not about filling pews with bums, it's about filling others with God's grace, peace and justice. So when we've had *our* fill here on Sunday mornings, that's just the beginning of the real transformation, the real sharing that happens outside these walls, after we leave from here.

We are called to change the world, together with Christ – one small act of generosity at a time, working miracles. Amen.

### Matthew 14:13-33

<sup>13</sup> As soon as Jesus heard the news, he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone. But the crowds heard where he was headed and followed on foot from many towns. <sup>14</sup> Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

<sup>15</sup> That evening the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.”

<sup>16</sup> But Jesus said, “That isn’t necessary—you feed them.”

<sup>17</sup> “But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish!” they answered.

<sup>18</sup> “Bring them here,” he said. <sup>19</sup> Then he told the people to sit down on the grass. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he gave the bread to the disciples, who distributed it to the people. <sup>20</sup> They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers. <sup>21</sup> About 5,000 men were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children!

<sup>22</sup> Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. <sup>23</sup> After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. <sup>25</sup> About three o’clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. <sup>26</sup> When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, “It’s a ghost!”

<sup>27</sup> But Jesus spoke to them at once. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “Take courage. I am here!”

<sup>28</sup> Then Peter called to him, “Lord, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water.”

<sup>29</sup> “Yes, come,” Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. “Save me, Lord!” he shouted.

<sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. “You have so little faith,” Jesus said. “Why did you doubt me?”

<sup>32</sup> When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. <sup>33</sup> Then the disciples worshiped him. “You really are the Son of God!” they exclaimed.