

9 Pentecost A (Lec 18)

Psalm 119:129-136

Matthew 14:13-21

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Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

20th Sunday of social distancing

Grace and peace to you from Christ.

And there it is. The moment Jesus learns of his cousin's death. Sometimes I wonder about those who drew the lines for the lectionary - and in an example like we have today - why start the passage at that particular place? "When Jesus heard about the beheading..."

There is no warning, no disclaimer that the following *may not be suitable for some viewers*

No "trigger" warning for those who may be impacted in hearing it.

No, parental advisory or "R" rating.

Just the stark news that John the Baptist had been murdered. It was cruel and violent, an expression of the state flexing its power; it was frivolous and manipulative as party goers schemed a seductive plan to sucker the king to end John's life.

"When Jesus heard about the beheading..." There is so much behind those first few words.

The story invites us to be quiet for a moment and simply watch and bear with the pain of grief that is described. Jesus goes off to be alone, without explanation, without cards of condolence or bouquets of flowers, or even so much as a box of tissue. He's *done* in that moment, bearing the full weight of a sadness that cuts to the bone. Sometimes there simply aren't words to sooth or answer our grief and pain when we are forced to hear or see or live the reality of this sometimes violent and misdirected world.

We are facing a lot of darkness these days. The grim tale of a pandemic, the clash of privilege and oppression, the lament and worry of September approaching, the grief of losing employment and connections with others, the fights over masks, the crosshairs of

the day that aim at who is at fault. Each feels like a tiny (or not so tiny) slice out of our happiness, out of our vitality, out of our joy. We are tired and worn.

No wonder we like the idea of miracles, of something that will distract us and take away the hurt that we feel. We cling to good news stories of the Bible in hope that we would one day find ourselves within one. If we could, we'd prefer to skip the news of John's death. It isn't what we want to hear and we can't make sense of it, so let's get to the good news of healing and the spectacular story of the bread and fish miracle. After all, isn't the point of the story that Jesus does miracles, Jesus is amazing, Jesus feeds thousands, Jesus offers abundance, Jesus...?

Not really. The point may be more in line with the love of Christ *countering* the darkness of the world. Love is the antidote, the balm, the new reality. We most clearly see love in the height and depth of its power when it fights for life. Our life.

Traditionally, when a person is buried in the cemetery, the presider begins to proclaim scriptures of hope and promise as soon as the casket or urn leaves the car, and all the way as it is carried to its place of rest. As a student, my internship supervisor explained that it is like we are casting out colourful bouquets to the gravestones; with death impossible to ignore all around us, we dare to reject grief and death as having the last word, and instead proclaim love and life.

And so, in Matthew today, Jesus's healing and feeding are not modeling for us how to be *stoic* in difficult times. The story isn't telling us to pull up our bootstraps, or grit our teeth in determination and just get on with things, like cute clichés declaring "when the going gets tough, the tough get going."

Rather, the fullness of the passage, from John's death, to Jesus' grief, to healing to loving describe the movement of life where God continually draws us out of the deep and into hope, out of grief and into community, out of despair and into love.

It's really then, an Easter story. And this Easter story isn't just a history lesson, but one that transforms our lives this day.

When we bear the weight of grief, sadness, sorrow or even anger,

1. Breathe. **Love yourself** enough to just feel it, name it, talk about it. Give yourself time. Pray. Journal. When Jesus heard the tragic news, he didn't straighten up and tough it out. He didn't ignore it. He went away. Alone. The news had to sink in. He had to learn to breathe again.
2. Breathe. **Trust** that it will not always hurt so much. Hurt may never be resolved, but it will not always feel the way it does in the moment. It may even come and go in waves, but it will not always hurt the same way.
3. Breathe. **Remember** love has something to tell you: you are beloved and held by God. You are not alone.

And so the ancient words of the Psalm (145) declare:

⁸Yahweh, you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. ⁹Yahweh, you are good to all and compassionate toward all your creatures. ¹⁴You lift up those who are falling and raise up those who are oppressed. ¹⁵The eyes of all look to you in hope, and you give them their food in due season. ¹⁶You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. ¹⁷Yahweh, you are just in all your ways and loving toward all that you have created. ¹⁸You are near to all who call upon you, all who call upon you in truth. ¹⁹You fulfill the desires of those who revere you; you hear their cry and save them. ²⁰You watch over all who love you, Yahweh, but you'll destroy all who are corrupt. ²¹My mouth will speak your praise, Yahweh, and may all creation bless your holy Name forever and ever.

Love always has the last word. Amen.