

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Proper 13 Year A
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It may never be more true than today, that to comprehend the truth within our gospel story we must look at its context. We cannot read only the words appointed for this morning and expect to glean any understanding into the real message of the gospel. Context is always everything in reading the scriptures, and it is particularly true today.

Our gospel text begins, " Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself". The "this" which is referred to is the beheading of John the Baptist, at a banquet overflowing with food, drink, and festivities, celebrating the birthday and life of Herod's wife, which ended in a death, the death of the one who prepared the way for Jesus.

Jesus has just heard this tragic news. We have to imagine Jesus is distraught with grief and perhaps even fear. His friend, his cousin, his companion who had a very specific and large role in bringing in the kingdom with Jesus is dead, killed by Herod, who Jesus hears is now panicked by superstition and thinks Jesus is John the Baptist come back from the dead. Jesus is in danger and is grieving deeply the death of John. That's the backdrop to today's story.

Jesus, like many of us, when we are confused, distraught, anxious, or in despair, wants to be left alone, wants to grieve in his own way and in his own time. He wants quiet time with God for comfort and perhaps for discernment and clarity about the next right steps. Jesus chooses to go into the desert, perhaps because this was a safe place from the political and religious elite, nobody wanted to be there. Food and water were scarce and the desert could also be a desolate and dangerous environment. Perhaps though Jesus goes into the wilderness because he remembered stories from his childhood, that it is within the desert or wilderness places of one's life, where resources appear to be scarce and vulnerability abounded, that God often showed up and provided all that was needed and more.

So Jesus went off to a deserted place to pray. But people heard that he was nearby and the crowds swarmed him and followed him into this desolate place. Our account reminds us that although there were some who reviled him and wanted to persecute him, there were many who pursued him and yearned for the grace and mercy he so freely offered.

So here's something very interesting to me. Jesus is exhausted, grieving, and just wanting to be alone. And as the crowds drew near him, he didn't retreat further away, instead, he drew near to them. This was remarkable grace and tells us a great deal about the character of God that Jesus revealed. From his place of misery, from

his state of emptiness through grief, Jesus remarkably was able to meet them with mercy. My goodness, what a gracious God we are in relationship with! Jesus moved toward them with compassion, as God moves toward us in our moments of need. Jesus' compassion unfolded into physical healing, the satiation of hunger of a multitude of people, as well as spiritual healing, by calming the anxious minds who also had heard of John's beheading, and by restoring relationships. For a crowd this size to gather, we know they must have come from number of distinct and diverse communities, yet by the end of the evening, they were bound together in the healing love of Christ and were formed as a generous community, and we can only imagine, joyfully then went about feeding others, to pay forward the generosity they encountered that evening with Jesus. The outcome of that particular evening was that shalom, that place of wholeness, peace, and completeness existed, for a brief moment, or for the lifetimes of the people involved, and has been carried forward to us through many peoples' lives who were touched by Jesus.

Here we need to remember again our context. With John's death, it could have been very easy for Jesus to look at what he no longer had; he no longer had his companion on the way. He could easily have slipped into a place of despair from which he could no longer feel the passion, energy, or call to bring in the kingdom, or to look around at the disciples who so far had not really comprehended anything he had said, and realized this just really wasn't going to work.

But Jesus didn't do that. He didn't do it with his own momentarily meager resources within his own soul, and he didn't do it with the meager 5 loaves and 2 fishes. Instead he offered it to God in thanksgiving and trusted that God would do something with it.

It required that Jesus looked beyond the disciples' request that others solve this overwhelming problem of too many people and too few loaves and fishes. Jesus did not allow the needy to be pushed away, just because the disciples couldn't see all that they had.

Jesus begins the process of spiritual transformation of the crowd by directing the disciples' attention away from what they don't have, to what they do have, and to invite them to look within themselves for the answer, not to look to others to solve the problem, such as the food markets in everyone's home town. Jesus said, look at what's in front of you first, and give thanks.

The difference between Jesus and his disciples in this scenario is that Jesus sees whatever they have, as meager as it may appear, as God's gift to them. The disciples see it as their own gift or resources from their own doing, or for their own consumption, rather than something offered to them from God.

When Jesus brings that sense of the true source of their food, which they are called to share, into the situation, this stretches the disciples and the people of the crowd into a new understanding, and suddenly, had you noticed, with this sudden awareness, the desert becomes green grass for everyone to sit on. We are no longer in the desert, but in the garden.

Jesus says look at what you have, give God thanksgiving for it, allow God's spirit to bless your offering, and then give it away~ and you will have more than you could have imagined.

This is exactly what we do in our Eucharist of course- we gather what we are giving back to God, in the form of the bread and the wine, and the money we offer for God's mission, and as we say in Rite 1: ourselves, our bodies, and our souls.

We then ask God to bless it, bring your spirit upon it and allow it to nourish us and others.

And then we break it open, so there's a part of the whole for everyone. If our Eucharistic prayer stopped here, we would be missing the whole point. We are fed so that we can give the abundance away. For when we are fed by God, there's always enough. We're all more than satisfied. And we want to give it away.

Jesus makes it clear - we always have two choices:

We can look at the same meager pile of resources and we can thank God for giving this to us and we can watch it multiply before our eyes, or we can assess our resources and only see what we don't have, what we need to add to our pile, what we need to pack up in boxes of our soul and never have enough.

How we see our situation: as flowing from God's abundance or as evidence of our own neediness, will determine what is possible.

With God, all things are possible. It was true for Jesus and his disciples and ultimately the crowd that evening; and it is true for us.

When we are faced with something which seems overwhelming, a situation where we can't imagine we have enough resources of any kind, whether that be money to buy 500 pencil cases, or patience in a long-term difficult relationship, or compassion to meet the needs of all those around us, or enough forgiveness to chip away at the hardness of our heart each moment, or enough humility to meet the seemingly persistent pride which sneaks into our hearts, or enough hope to wake up each day and put one foot in front of the other when dealing with a situation where there seems to be such little possibility of restoration, it's easy to say, we don't have enough. It's easy to say someone else is going to have to pick up the ball and run with it. I'm out of resources. And yet what Jesus tells us today is that when we take this seemingly logical and sane approach, the same one the disciples did in that desert, our possibilities are always going to be limited. We have said there is not

enough and there will not be enough. We are trusting only on our resources, not imagining how God's blessing upon our resources, could unleash the potential of abundance.

We could choose instead, as Jesus instructed us, to look at what we do have and to see it all as God's gift to us. Not to hold onto, not to hide, not to hoarde, but to pay forward, to give to others, so all may be fed.

In this process, Jesus' heart, the one which was broken by the recent news of John's violent death, was perhaps healed when his heart overflowed with gratitude for what God had given them. Yes, only 5 loaves and 2 fishes, but God gave them each other, and God blessed them. They had plenty to give away.

I think this is one of the few times when the disciples seem to finally get it. They receive from Jesus with outstretched hands, and immediately go out and give it away. They have experienced spiritual abundance and they are changed. They are no longer looking outside themselves for an answer for this hungry crowd. They have turned their gaze inward and know that the answer will be found in their gratitude.

And from gratitude, generosity flows. We no longer have too little; we have more than we need, and our hearts are on fire to give it away.

So will we collect the 500 pencil cases for the Blessing of the Backpacks? What if we only have 100 collected so far ~ shall we begin to assume we won't get the other 400 in 2 weeks and figure others will have to make up for what we lack or should we continually offer the ones collected and the hearts which have been turned toward these 500 children who are in need, for God's blessing, and trust that God will do something good with our meager offerings?

We can ask all sorts of questions which offer us the choice Jesus offered his disciples: will we look at what we don't have ~ or will we offer to God what we do have and allow God to do something marvelous with what we can offer?

Will people continue to come forward and offer their talents or skills or time to the ministries we're strengthening or beginning? Will we have enough people who will commit to EFM next year? Will we be able to purchase chimes for our young people who want to participate in a bell choir – and will there be enough families who will commit to carve the time out of their family lives to make that program meaningful for our parish? Will we have the money to continue our healing reach out into our community, through our meals, our collections for the needy, and through our presence of healing hands as we expand the membership of the Order of St. Luke?

It's easy to go where the disciples did. We don't have enough. We can live in scarcity and focus on the fact we only have 2 people signed up for EFM so far, and worry

how will we get 6 more people committed by next year? We can take any of the opportunities God has placed in front of us in forming us and the community around us into disciples and be certain we don't and won't have enough – or we can trust in God.

Jesus says trust in me. Come with me instead into the place of abundance. Turn your hearts to God, see your life through the grace of God, allow God to bless all of your lives, and then settle into that place of generosity.

The real wonder of this story some call a miracle is that it continues with us and through us. God still deeply and passionately cares for those most vulnerable – the hungry, the poor, the ones who need the nourishment of hope or joy or love, and God continues to use us to care for them.

Wherever you are in the process of spiritual transformation, for we are all on the path somewhere, may we continue to do this work of increasing in self knowledge, of knowing what we bring to the altar to offer to God, of developing an attitude of gratitude, and then of giving it all away, so that we and others may not only be satisfied in our hunger for truth and justice, but will allow God's reign of abundance to be how people refer to our congregation. For when we do, suddenly and without warning or explanation, our baskets will be overflowing.

Amen.