

Sermon

August 6, 2017

Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

Based on Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus needed some alone time. He needed to get away from it all, just for a little while. His cousin, John, who was known as the Baptist, had just had his head cut off by the order of Herod. This signaled a turning point for Jesus. Now that they took out John, Jesus is next. This development placed before Jesus the realization that his painful suffering and death would not be far off. Plus, this was his cousin who had died in such a shameful and violent way. So Jesus needed to get away for a little while. He needed to think things over. He needed to process what he was feeling. Jesus needed to grieve. He needed some time alone so that he could be still and know that God is God.

Now, I know this may seem strange, to think that Jesus needed to spend some time alone with God. After all, we believe that Jesus is God in the flesh. What does it mean that he needed time to be alone with God when that is who he is? But it is part of the mystery. Yes, Jesus is fully God. But Jesus is also fully human. Jesus is just like you and me. And we all know what it's like to grieve the passing of someone we love. We have all lost a cousin, or someone even closer in our family relationships. We have all experienced those times in our lives where we felt like we were at a turning point. Something has happened, or we anticipate something happening, that is going to profoundly impact our lives going forward. Maybe it is receiving a cancer diagnosis. Perhaps it is being told that you are being laid off at the age of 55. Maybe it is holding the foreclosure notice in your hand. We all experience times in our lives when we need to get away for awhile, to go through a season of prayer, to sit in the presence of God, sit with our feelings, our sorrows, anxieties, uncertainties. We all experience times when we need to grieve. And when Jesus heard of John's demise, this was one of his times.

But as Jesus approached the place where he wished to be alone with God, he saw before him a huge crowd of people. This crowd was full of people who had needs to be attended to. There were many gathered before Jesus who were ill and hoped to be healed by him. And when Jesus saw the crowd of people, he felt compassion toward them. In spite of his own flagging spirit, in spite of the weight he was carrying, in spite of his need to be alone for awhile to grieve, Jesus did not tell the crowd to come back another day. He did not tell them to sit tight while he

went off for awhile to rest. No, Jesus set aside his need for renewal in order to respond to the needs laid before him. With a spirit of service, out of compassion, and knowing that he possessed the capacity to respond, Jesus helped those in need. He would not let his own weariness, his own burdens, prevent him from responding to the needs of others.

Anyone who has been a parent may know something of this. Especially when you were caring for your children when they were infants and toddlers, they had needs and depended on you to fulfill them. They could not feed themselves. They could not change their own diapers. At least in my experience, a couple of my kids apparently didn't know how to fall asleep on their own. There were so many nights, 3 o'clock in the morning, rocking one of my kids to sleep. In spite of all the other stuff that needed done, in spite of the worries about how to pay the bills, in spite of the frustrations of work that weighed on you, there you were, responding to the needs of your children, setting aside your own needs in order to care for them. You didn't do it because you got paid to do it. You didn't care for your kids' needs out of a sense of duty. No, you cared for the needs of your kids, in spite of your own weariness, because you love your kids and you knew that they needed you to care for them. Compassionate love is what prompts us to set our own needs aside to respond to the needs of others. Being paid to help isn't enough. Helping out of a sense of duty isn't enough. It's easy to call in sick or let someone else worry about it. Compassionate love doesn't let you off the hook that easily. It drives us to respond, even though we are tired, feeling a little overwhelmed, or in need of a little TLC ourselves. And Jesus had compassionate love in abundance. That's what drove him more than anything else, because God is love.

So as Jesus saw this large crowd, and saw that many were ill and in need of healing, Jesus responded, offering what he could do, which was to heal people. Jesus is a healer. So Jesus did what only he can do. But when it came to feeding the people, this was a need in which Jesus knew his disciples could pitch in. He knew his disciples could not work miracles of healing. But they could contribute to the process of feeding that large crowd.

In other words, Jesus wasn't going to let his disciples off the hook. But not just that, he didn't want his disciples to miss the blessing of meeting the practical needs of others. This was a hungry crowd. For whatever reason, it appeared this big crowd had not considered bringing any food with them. In their haste to run out and meet up with Jesus, this crowd just took off with no thought about practical matters such as packing a lunch. So, as the day was getting on, and the

hour was late, the crowd, along with Jesus and the disciples, were starting to get hungry. This healing service had been going on for hours. Everyone needed some refreshment.

Confronted with a big, hungry crowd, the disciples suggested what any of us would have suggested: they suggested to Jesus that he wrap this up and send the people on their way so that they can hit McDonalds or Steak and Shake or whatever to get something to eat on their way home. That's the easiest way to respond when confronted with a bunch of needy people, send them off to fend for themselves. It's one thing to provide some food for one or two folks, but the idea of feeding that crowd in a pinch is completely unreasonable.

But Jesus didn't let his disciples off the hook. He wasn't going to let them get by with the easy response. He didn't want them to miss out on this opportunity to respond to a practical need. And he knew they had the means to respond if they would trust him. So he challenged them to feed the crowd themselves. What a challenge! It seems so unreasonable. It seemed impossible for the disciples to meet such a huge demand with the little food they had on hand.

Now Jesus could have done this all by himself. He could have called down bread from heaven, just like when he gave manna to the Israelites when they were journeying through the wilderness all those years ago. He could have caused a bunch of birds suddenly fall from the sky. Who knows how, Jesus could have fed those people, worked some kind of miracle, all by himself.

But Jesus chose not to do this one by himself. Only he had the power to work the healing miracles. But the feeding of the crowd was something that he did not have to do all by himself. Others could help. His disciples could pitch in on this one. And so he challenged them to step up and do all they could to meet the need placed before them. It didn't matter if they had only a little bit of food. They had something to share, even if it seemed insignificant and not nearly enough. They could participate in the miracle, so Jesus invited them to participate. He wasn't going to do this all by himself while his disciples watched Jesus do his thing and then applaud his efforts. No, he looked to them to get in on this as well. He wasn't going to allow them to be mere bystanders.

Now I think Jesus was trying to teach his disciples and us a lesson about the power of teamwork. And by teamwork I mean the teamwork between us and God. We believe that God is love and that God is compassionate. We believe that God responds to our needs. But what Jesus is showing us is that God doesn't work solo. Sure, there are some things that only God can do. But if there is a possibility

that others can help God with responding to the need, then God is going to make room for that partnership to happen. God is all about relationships. God is all about teaming up. God doesn't let us off the hook, but expects us to do our part, to contribute to what God is doing in order to respond to the needs of others.

Bread is an example of this. Think about how bread demonstrates how God and us work together. Bread is composed of some kind of grain: wheat, barley, or rye the most common. That grain has to be planted and grown by somebody. I suggest that the natural process of growing grain is something that God initiated. You could say that the growth is what God cares for. But the planting and harvesting of the grain is what we do. We certainly don't cause grain to grow. That's a natural process that we work with, but did not originate from us.

Once the grain is harvested, it has to be threshed and milled in order to have the flour that is needed to mix with some yeast, some oil, some liquid, in order to form the dough that is then shaped and baked to produce a loaf of bread. This is all our doing. But if it wasn't for the natural process of the growth of grain which God provided, then we would not have bread. Bread is an example of God and us working together.

And so, Jesus challenges his disciples to pool together all the food resources they have, present it to Jesus, let Jesus do his thing, and then distribute the food to all the people. Only Jesus could bless that small amount of food so that it would be enough to feed everyone. The disciples couldn't do that. But they did what was in their capacity to do, which was to give what they had and trust that Jesus would take it from there. The key word is trust. The need was so great, to feed all those people. The resources were clearly too small to meet such a vast need. For it to work, the disciples not only had to bring the food, they had to bring their trust in Jesus that it would work out. And so it did.

And not only did it work out, there were plenty of leftovers. Each disciple collected a basket full of leftovers. That was for them. They started out with a few loaves of bread and some fish for themselves to eat. They ended up with more than they started with. They ended up having a bigger dinner than they otherwise would have.

I can't help but think of the free store on Parsons, where the school supplies we have collected today will be going. The free store started many years ago with the idea that area churches would be invited to bring clothes and other household items to the site on Parsons, and that all these items would be given away to those who needed them with no questions asked. As Rev. John Edger tells it, he and his team didn't think this would last long at all. They were not

confident that many churches would respond. They doubted if they would get many donations. And they would not be surprised if all that was donated would be gone in a short period of time. That would be the end of the free store.

But that's not what happened. Instead, they were deluged with donations. I have seen it first hand. The back room is a large storage area full of clothes. Our job that evening was to sort through the clothes into sizes and fold them nice and neat for display. John says that storage area has never been empty since they started. It didn't matter how many people came through the store to take items, there was always more donations to display. For me, the Free Store is a living example of the feeding of the five thousand. Thousands of people, moved in their spirit by God to be generous, have donated thousands of items and thousands of hours of time, in order to meet the practical needs of thousands of people, for the past 18 years. God prompts, people respond with what they have, needs are met. This is how God partners with us to meet practical needs.

Jesus looked over the crowd that had gathered out in the middle of nowhere and what he saw was a crowd that was satisfied. All who were sick had been healed. Everyone had eaten and were well fed. There was nothing left to be done but to dismiss the crowd. So Jesus sent everyone on their way. He even told the disciples to head on out. He would catch up with them later. Finally, Jesus was left alone. So he headed up the mountain to take care of his own need to grieve the passing of his cousin, John. Jesus took time to care for himself. He didn't put it off forever. He didn't hurry on to the next ministry assignment. He didn't stuff down the grief, the heavy weight he was carrying. The healing of all those people, the feeding of the 5,000 plus people, was a big deal. It was an amazing miracle. But Jesus was still hurting. The reality that his impending death was looming. The heaviness was still weighing on him. He still needed time to be alone with God to pray, to rest, to be still and know that God is God.

This is another lesson that Jesus is teaching us, the need to care for yourself. What do you do when there are no pressing needs confronting you? It's tempting to feel like your day has to be full of activity, doing something productive. Otherwise, it seems like the wasting of a day. Some people deal with their grief and their anxieties by keeping busy, filling the day with activity, or busy-ness, or distractions, whether it be TV, frittering away time on the internet, or gossiping with friends. Sometimes we avoid being still and knowing that God is God. Sometimes we avoid confronting and sitting with our grief, our anxieties, the heaviness of life. We are driven to give of ourselves and keep giving until we have nothing left to give. And more often than not our bodies begin to let us know that

we need to step back and rest. Sometimes it takes going to the hospital to realize the need to step back and rest, to be still in God's presence and let God be God.

Another problem many of us face from time to time is compassion fatigue. There is so much need in the world. We see children living in poverty, family or friends burdened by addictions, famine and war that plagues different areas of the world, floods, earthquakes, tornados, and on and on. When we are confronted with all this need it is easy to reason that I have done my part, I can't help everyone, someone else is going to have to pitch in. And that is true. We all have to do what we can, but we can't meet every need all by ourselves. As Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you." It's fine to acknowledge our limitations. But the problem is reaching compassion fatigue, which means walling ourselves off from the needs of others. It is reaching the point where we do not see the need or feel any compassion at all for those in need. It's the hardening of cynicism. It's the looking the other way and not seeing the needs right in front of you. I believe that when we don't take the time to rest in God's presence and let God be God, when we go, go, go and take on more than what we can handle, try to do things all by ourselves without trusting in others or trusting in God, then we are setting ourselves up for burnout, for compassion fatigue. I've been there. Probably all of us have from time to time. That's why it is important for us to learn the lesson Jesus teaches at the end of this miracle. He took the time for solitude, to be alone with God, to rest in the presence of God, to be still and know that God is God. There are times when God challenges us to give what we have to meet the needs of others. But there are also times when we need to open ourselves to receive what only God can give.

So what is God prompting in you? Perhaps you have been too much of a passive observer and God is prompting you to offer what you have to meet the needs of others. Perhaps you are being prompted to ease off the throttle a little and take the time to rest in God's presence. Only you know the state in which you find yourself. I urge you to pay attention to what you are being prompted by God to do, whether it be to give or to receive. And then act accordingly.