

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

6th August 2023 (Proper 13A-1)

Saint Mark's, Penn Yan

The Rev. R. Columba Salamony

Breaking Bread

In the name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity: One God. **Amen.**

The church where I was baptized in Baltimore once published a semi-regular parish cookbook for a fundraiser or something... I don't seem to own a copy of it—but I'm sure if my mother were to bring me one and we were to flip through it, we'd find seventeen recipes for macaroni salad, each with a singularly unique ingredient, two dozen variations on devilled eggs, endless hot dish casseroles and jello salads, punch made with 7-Up, and all of those other familiar recipes we'd expect to find in a church cookbook. But of course, what made me think of those cookbooks wasn't some long-running search for something to take to Grub Theology, but was instead the cookbooks' title: "Five Loaves and Two Fish."

When we simply hear that phrase, most of us immediately know what it refers to—the feeding of the five thousand, which we read in today's scripture passages. The feeding of the five thousand, of course, is one of the more familiar Gospel stories, one of two miracles to occur in all four Gospels. It's something we all have heard preached each and every year, and we just **know** it... Even knowing it so well that, at bible study this week, we didn't know what else to say about it that hadn't been said before. So, I looked a little harder, and I think I found something...

As the Gospel passage is printed and was read this morning, it is missing part of its first verse. Verse 13 actually starts: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns." When Jesus heard "this," when the crowds heard "it," ... Do you know what they're referring to?

The 12 verses that precede today's reading point to another important story, though perhaps one that leaves us with a less happy message: the beheading of John the Baptist. Herod arrests John for questioning his marriage to his brother's wife, but because the crowds regarded John as a prophet, he feared executing him. Herodias, the wife, gets clever and sets up a crafty scheme—she has her daughter dance before Herod and the guests at his banquet. Herod was so pleased with her dancing that he promised her anything she might ask. Prompted by Herodias, she asks for the head of John the Baptist, and Herod, not wanting to be shamed before his guests, complies. He presents her with John's head, brought out on a platter.

"Now when Jesus heard this"—when Jesus heard that John had been killed—"he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it,"—when the crowds heard that John had been killed—"they followed him on foot from the towns." So, when Jesus comes ashore after taking the time he needed to process John's death, he steps from the boat and sees the crowd. Even through his sorrow, he did what he needed to do: he had compassion on them—because he, too, was deep in grief.

If we read this story through that lens—through an interpretation that the crowds were grieving John's arrest and murder—we can see in the story of the feeding of the five thousand a true wilderness experience, both in the figurative and literal sense. These people have come from the towns and into the wilderness, and while we're not told what emotion they're experiencing, knowing that they're doing this as a reaction to John's beheading tells us that they're facing deep grief, sorrow, frustration, anger, fear, listlessness... Because, yet again, the boot of Rome is on their necks. And Jesus looks at them with compassion because

he is also experiencing that same grief, sorrow, frustration, anger, fear, and listlessness. If they can arrest and kill John, can't they do the same to him? After all, the crowds regard him as a prophet, too.

Can you imagine being in that crowd? All of the raw emotion spilling out into a tight-throated chaotic frenzy that is simultaneously still and explosive?

In the summer of 2020, I felt that energy several times in about a two- or three-week span. On May 25th, George Floyd was lynched by a Minneapolis police officer. In the following weeks, the nation reeled in deep turmoil and anguish over yet another Black body killed by law enforcement. I stood outside the Oakland Police Department a few days later with hundreds—nearly a thousand—other people, collectively mourning the sin of police violence before the police turned on *us* with flash bangs and tear gas. A few days later, over fifteen thousand people—maybe even as many as twenty thousand of us—gathered at Dolores Park and marched through the streets of San Francisco. The magnitude of this solidarity march flooded the entire city with cheers and support as we held our signs high and raised our fists even higher. In Berkeley on that following Saturday, over four thousand of us gathered and chanted “SAY THEIR NAME” as leaders recited a litany of names of Black people killed by police before we took to the streets behind a marching band, symbolizing our desire to bury racism in the spirit of a New Orleans funeral procession. A week later, 1200 people gathered at the Rockridge BART Station in Oakland and marched to Sproul Plaza on the UC Berkeley campus, where we knelt in silence for eight minutes and forty-six seconds.

Jesus is here, in the wilderness, with 5000 men—and an unnamed number of women and children. All angry, all distraught—at the same time, restless and anxious about what comes next. Jesus no longer has a crowd; he has an army. And so, Jesus does what any military leader would do: he gives the crowd ‘bread and circuses’—gives them what they need to lead them to victory. This is what the people want—they want to feel like they’ve made a difference. They want Rome’s boot off their necks. They want systemic change that will eliminate the top-down mechanisms of oppression that define their occupation. They want the people to join them as they march down the streets chanting, “NO JUSTICE. NO PEACE.”

And Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish that the disciples had on hand... and he breaks the bread... and he shares that bread with the grieving, suffering crowd ... and there is enough bread that they all are full, each person is satisfied—a sensation that, even today, is relatively unknown to the poor and oppressed.

In Jesus’ action of feeding the crowds, he unites them to themselves—connects the community to itself. They aren’t bound together by oaths sworn to the provider of bread but through their commonality... through their cumulative suffering... through their collective grief... through their desire to know justice and peace... through their sorrow, frustration, anger, fear, and listlessness... through their desire to have enough to eat... through Jesus’ compassion for them, his compassion for their restlessness and anxiety...

Their banquet ends in forging a new community of people who commit themselves to looking for a better world. They’re like the people of Israel who went into the wilderness as a ragtag group of slaves and wandered, afraid, but God gave them manna, and they came together as the people of God.

What would it truly look like for the bread which we break to make us into people who find commonality in our experience? How could that bread make us into a community of people who like each other, who break bread together, and who become family?