

Sermon TUMC – Gathering Sunday September 15, 2019

Reflecting on Matthew 14 – Part II

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Previously, on Matthew 14...

Last Sunday, Michele asked the question “What Biblical story are we living right now?” It is Matthew 14: Herod kills John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples feed over 5000 people in the wilderness, and Jesus appears to the disciples while walking on water.

In episode one, she proposed that this is our call to live Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, and love kindness/mercy and walk humbly with your God.”

The scene about Herod captures the political climate we are living in our own times. We heard our own call to seek justice, just like John the Baptist. We cut to the prequel to recall the Sermon of the Mount: it is a blessing to have a hunger and a thirst for justice.

The feeding of the 5000 in the wilderness stood-in for loving mercy (chesed). We saw this an example of acting out of mercy towards the needs of our world.

Many hands of community-making were involved in the work of compassion for the hungry forlorn people that found Jesus in the wilderness.

Today, in our final Episode (the thriller portion of the story) we will learn about walking humbly with our God. Spoiler alert: there may be a ghost-sighting, and IGG (Imagination generated graphics) special effects of Jesus, and Peter walking on water.

Prepare now for Matthew 14, part II.

We begin with a bit more about Jesus and the disciples’ compassion in the wilderness, or the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, as it’s commonly known. And then we’ll move on to the walking on water.

We might be tempted in these two stories to get stuck on an enlightened question many people ask the Bible: Did that *really* happen? In this reading, this is not really the question we are asking, rather, we are asking “how do we connect with this passage?”

So I invite you again to do what you do with any other story, or when you watch or listen for entertainment . To “suspend disbelief” and to try to see what new thing or renewed perspective God might give us today.

Before I go further, you should know that we are not the first to apply this story to our ministry as a church. I wanted to make sure to tell you a curiosity about our

neighbourhood. Did you know that in the east chapel of the Corpus Christi church down the block, there is a mural by Canadian artist William Kurelek? It is from the 70's and, in my recollection, shows Jesus (along with some catholic clergy) multiplying the loaves and the fishes at Woodbine park, with the CN Tower in the background. Our sister-church is celebrating their centenary in a couple of weeks, so perhaps you could check this out at their open house on Sep 28 and 29.¹

So, I probably don't need to tell you that the feeding of the 5000 has become a symbol for the Christian church. Breaking of bread is now shorthand for Communion (and potlucks).

But as Matthew tells it, it is also full of other symbolism for the original audience of this narrative.

For example, Remember how they went into the wilderness? In Hebrew that is *midbar* is a place of regrouping, or of ritual beginnings in Jewish faith. Think of God's provision of manna in the desert. Think of the rituals where the head of the family blesses the bread, think of the 12 baskets of leftovers representing a restoration of the 12 tribes of Israel, think of Elisha multiplying bread and oil. These are all important in how we listen to this story. It's also important to remember that Jesus' ministry and his capacity for compassion (i.e. standing with the pain of the other) are linked with his Jewish faith. He wasn't operating in a vacuum.

As I apply this to our experience at the beginning of the practical church-year, we are also not coming with a blank slate. We too are building on things good and bad that our faith ancestors have done or believed in.

In speaking about mission, Elaine Heath, the speaker at MC Canada whom I mentioned last Sunday, made another interesting observation/invitation.² She invited us back to observing the *behavior* of Jesus – not so much his words – and to model our discipleship on how Jesus acted. “Reacquainting ourselves with the behavior of Jesus in the gospels will give us insight that we need in order to heal the wounds of colonialism, imperialism and all the other isms done in the name of evangelism... We've got to start acting like the real Jesus!”

So how *did* he act? This is the “love mercy” part of the story in my reading, so it's not so much about the miracle. This multiplication and distribution of food is a subtle gift-miracle that Jesus performs – sort of like when he turned water into wine. It could be that only the people closest knew that anything unusual had even taken place. It could be that nobody but his closest disciples were aware that it was happening – maybe even the disciples were wondering “what just happened?” once they were collecting baskets. It's not about the miracle itself, it's about what motivated the miracle.

¹ <https://www.beachmetro.com/2019/09/08/beach-memories-corpus-christi-roman-catholic-church-celebrates-100-years-in-the-community/>

² For videos of her presentations see <http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/IgniteGathering2019>

Bread in the wilderness is a story that has inspired generations of Christians to think about God's abundance and generosity. And here's what I know and what I want us to remember as we claim this story for ourselves: **God is acting generously whether folks are aware of it or not.** Whether we are aware of it or not, there's a lot going on. That's a good thing.

So now we move on to **Walk Humbly** – or the part where Jesus spends some time in prayer and then is seen walking on water.

Jesus walking on water is a very familiar image. For your amusement, there's also a link here to several cartoons about this. A couple of my favourites show Jesus' mother trying to give him a bath as a kid and he doesn't sink in to the water. The other shows Peter walking on ice, with the caption: "Peter found that his faith was much stronger in winter."³

[How many of you have heard a sermon on this passage? What was the main point?]

I can tell you from a simple web search that there are hundreds of sermons explaining what it all means. *[Here's a video example of one that is not too bad⁴]* But here's the thing, Bible narratives weren't meant ever to have one distinct meaning, they were not meant to have a moral to the story nor to have clear "good guys" and "bad guys." The Bible is also not necessarily always showing people on their best behavior, either. Still it's hard to get out of that mindset when we read it. One of my favourite quotes is "If I can't be a good example, then at least let me be a terrible warning" – Catherine Aird. Some things in the Bible are terrible warnings.

Who am I to say what the "right" interpretation is? I'm offering one. Having said that, I want to let you know that I'm humbly offering this sermon in the spirit of "you have heard it said, but I say." I'd like to especially steer very clear of what I see as one very common and harmful application of this passage: the idea that Peter did not have enough faith and that Jesus was reprimanding him for that.

In my experience this has led to a concept that there is such a thing as "enough" faith that will compel God to do "miracles" on our behalf; and that if "miracles" don't happen, it is somehow our fault for not having faith, or not trying hard enough. I think that idea is firmly based on self-centeredness and pride, and it has done a lot of damage to a lot of Christians and a lot of people who no longer call themselves Christians. That is not what this passage is about.

³ <http://christianfunnypictures.com/2016/09/14-hilarious-cartoons-jesus-walking-water.html> (Cartoons)

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGN4zCS9VnI> (video)

Here is the key thing I'm trying to tell you about this passage, if you remember nothing else: Walking humbly with our God means knowing our place, taking our place in the scheme of things, not trying to manipulate God.

Let's explore what is happening in this scene:

John the Baptist dies (is killed), Jesus tries to go off on his own, the crowds follow, the disciples are moved by compassion, they attend to the crowd, and then, when that is all over, Jesus puts them all on a boat and dismisses the multitude.

Jesus, for his part, finally gets to have his time alone, and spends it "on the mountain." Wouldn't you know, mountain's in the Bible, and in Matthew, are also symbolic. They represent a place of encounter with God. So Jesus spends almost the whole night praying. As a kid we used to have all night prayer vigils, and it was the most boring thing in my life. So when I look at this I wonder what happened? We're not going to find an answer, I just wonder. (What did that look like? Did he walk and talk out loud? Did he meditate quietly? Did he pray by name for each and every one of the 5000 people? Did he scream out to God?— hard to say). The point is that we are trying to imitate his behavior so what we imitate is this call to prayer, to get grounded when things are tough.

How do you pray? How do *you* reset your connection with God when you need to?

So Jesus is praying. And over here are the disciples floating there out on another powerful biblical symbol – water. "Water is not only water, at least not when the storyteller is Jewish."⁵ Think of the creation story in Genesis 1. Water represents chaos and the forces of creation and destruction, the return to the formless void. No wonder they were scared. Think of the hurricane in Barbados this past week! Think of us floating out in the midst of climate uncertainty.

The disciples are now in familiar "territory" (watertory?) for the fishermen among them, they're in a boat. So I find it hard to believe that they're just scared of some choppy water. I wonder if they were still scared of the political situation and threats of death that they were about to return to under Herod.

The disciples don't know it, but, in the middle of a lot of fear and chaos, they are about to have a revelation from God. Somewhere between 3 and 6 am, they're tired, they're trying to sleep and row in rough water on a boat, they can't even be sure of what they are seeing, but it sure looks like -- a ghost! walking towards them on the water! (They must have thought: "Who we gonna call?")

Fortunately Jesus calls first and says the most amazing thing: "Take heart! It is *I am*, do not be afraid."

⁵ Swanson, *ibid.* pg 193

Wait, where have we heard that name before, “I am”? Yes, at the burning bush, when Moses asks God for God’s name. And God replies, “I am.” So you see, the frightened disciples are being reminded that they are dealing with the very creative force behind the entire Universe. That is maybe more scary than seeking with a ghost?

Then Peter tests to make sure that it’s Jesus and does this thing that he does, he jumps off the boat. Then tries to walk on water on his own, and then sinks like a rock⁶ Peter means rock, there’s a pun in the story. Then he is helped by Jesus, who asks him to believe. There’s another word that we’ve really messed up. Believe in the gospels means trust, to put your trust in not mental assent to doctrine. It just isn’t. Jesus takes him by the hand and makes him get back to the boat.

Here’s another thing I’m *not* saying today. We are not using this story to talk about whether or not to take risks. I’m indebted to author Richard Swanson for putting so clearly how this text has been co-opted into a motivational speech (I quote an edited version of what he says):

This scene has always attracted speakers who wanted to motivate an audience to take risks. You’ve got to step out of the boat, they say. ‘Miracles are waiting for you if you are willing to take the risk.’

... Risk is indeed necessary, and willingness to try things that might be impossible, is crucial to human progress. But to read this scene only this way is to misrepresent the disciples who remain in the boat. Most risk taking interpretations sketch them as hanging on to their comfort and safety. That deliberately ignores the rowing they were doing and implies that in times of danger what we need are people to jump out off the boat and not people who do what seasoned veterans of difficult times have learned long ago. Grizzled vets know: in a storm, rowing is good, panic is bad.

... If you read risk-taking interpretations carefully many of them are urging optimism. “If you expect to sink, you will sink,” they say, implying the corollary, “If you sink, it’s because you expected to sink.” There is real mischief here. Stories of improbable success always charm us. ... Such stories are told by people whose risk paid off. We did not hear, or want to hear, the stories of those who also took risks, and sank to the bottom never to rise.”(end of quote)

So, how *is* this our story? You have heard it said that this is about optimism, about having enough faith and taking enough risk. Yes, we need faith and risk, but I say to you, that this is about remembering that everything we do in the pursuit of justice and of compassion, is done under the auspices of God, creator of the Universe, who is much greater than we are.

⁶ Swanson

⁷ Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 195

When Peter called out "Save me!" this is who came to his rescue.

This is people in the Jewish faith tradition, our ancestors in the faith, begin many of their prayers: *Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam...* Which means, Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe..."

This is my invitation at the conclusion of these stories: Know your place. Walk humbly with your God.

As imitators of Jesus, let us ground ourselves in a practice of prayer, a practice of compassion, a practice of taking heart, having courage, of calling for help, of keeping on rowing and of trusting Jesus in the midst of chaos.

Do not be afraid. Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

May *I am* take us by the hand.