

February 24, 2019
We're Getting Wet Either Way
Annette Hill Briggs
Matthew 14:13-33

[Feeding the Five Thousand]

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

In a certain Baptist church in the South, it was traditional for the deacons to take the new pastor on an all-day Saturday fishing trip. When they hired their first woman pastor, they wondered whether it was still appropriate – and decided it might offend her if they stopped. She hated fishing, but she too did not want to offend. They picked her up

before daylight, arrived at the lake, got the boat into the water, and motored out half a mile from shore.

She was freezing from the get-go and wanted her sweater, but she was too embarrassed to ask them to take her back. Finally, she said to herself, *This is ridiculous*, so she stepped out of the boat, walked across the water to the car, got her sweater, walked back across the water, and got back into the boat. And everyone just kept fishing in total silence. The next day at church, a deacon who hadn't been there asked, *Well, how did it go?* To which another replied, *Brother, not only can that preacher not fish, she cain't swim either.*

That one never gets old! The way Matthew 14 never gets old. The way these two stories overflow with the message of abundance – the abundance of poverty and fear and violence in this world, some of it driven by human greed and injustice, some of it driven by nature itself – but more than that, the abundance of grace; the abundance of faith; the abundance of courage and goodness and joy, available to people willing to have their hearts and minds transformed, willing to keep their eyes on Jesus even when the wind picks up. Because we are getting wet either way, friends.

Let's pray. *We cannot predict the future, o God, except to say that it will be mostly ordinary with some terrible and some lovely along the way. Disappointments and losses. But rain too – for the just and the unjust. We do our worst and try our best – and either way end up more wet than we thought we'd be, soaked to the skin some days, for better and for worse. So help us live by faith, o God, to face each day with the hope and the courage that breed justice, kindness and decency. We pray in Jesus' name.*

We call it speaking truth to power. But really, it's saying out loud what most everybody knows already – in this case that Herod, Rome's puppet ruler in Israel, was sleeping with his brother's wife, a clear violation of the Torah. Jewish leadership in Jerusalem may have been too spineless to stand up to Herod, but John wasn't. For his preaching he got thrown in jail and then executed, his head literally served up on a platter. Herod was equally afraid of Jesus, so when Jesus heard about his cousin's fate, Matthew says he left that place to go somewhere and pray. No doubt!

But word got out. And the crowds who had been following him kept doing so, as many as fifteen or even twenty thousand people – which explains Herod's anxiety. Can you imagine if 20,000 Americans were following one preacher from town to town on foot, listening as she pointed out the moral failing of the government? The church today should be so faithful.

Jesus' plan for a personal prayer retreat was interrupted, and the interruption became his plan. He didn't get to pray. He got to work: teaching, healing, casting out demons. All day. Exhaustion now layered on top of grief – grief for John, his cousin and his friend, his one and only colleague. Now he has only these twelve clowns to depend on, doing the best they can, no doubt. But still. Doing their best at the end of this very long day, they attempt to interrupt the interruption. They suggest Jesus exercise some

self-care. Self-care is big in ministry circles, don't you know? Because burnout is bigger still. *It's late*, they say. *These people need to eat. Let's send them back to town to buy their supper.*

Who is actually hungry, do you suppose? It's not the crowds complaining, is it? You know that feeling, right? I get it every time I pick up my Panera salad, then stop at the light right by the man with the sign that says, "Anything Helps." Jesus agrees – that it's time to eat, at least.

But his reason, Matthew says, is compassion. That they were hungry hurt his own heart, stirred his own heart to act. So, *you do it*, he says to his clowns. Interesting that Jesus stirred to action means his disciples are the actors. We are his muscle when he exercises his compassion. *We can't*, they reply; *we have nothing*.

They said nothing because they weren't using Jesus math, but rather privileged people math. You know privileged people math, right? In privileged people math, 5 loaves + 2 fish = 12 fish sandwiches for us. In privileged people math, what you have plus what you want always equals exactly enough for me and mine. In privileged people math, 5 loaves + 2 fish also equals ZERO. Zero fish sandwiches for people whose neediness I'm tired of. The disciples are just beginning to learn Jesus math where 5 loaves + 2 fish = 20,000+ fish sandwiches. Jesus math takes a long, long time to learn. It's heart and mind work. Cravings, addictions, reputation are all involved. Fear, trust – in a word, faith.

Matthew will tell this story again in a couple of chapters, setting it that time in a Gentile place, drilling his disciples on the fact that Jesus math works the same for all people everywhere. That's big – very big. Jesus was serious about this math of his. One way we know? This "5 loaves + 2 fish = 20,000 fish sandwiches" is the only story told in all four gospels. The only one. Is 20,000 even right? We get the number by giving all 5,000 men one wife and two kids. But it could be more with grandmas and grandpas. It's church food after all – of course people expected seconds! Were any teenagers there? Good Lord – it might have been 40,000 fish sandwiches!

Bring me your twelve sandwiches, Jesus says. He organized the crowd (probably made the teenage boys go to the back of line), *looked to heaven, blessed the food, broke the food, and then gave it to the disciples and told them to serve everyone*. There, the foreshadowing: Eucharist and cross. People ate their fish sandwiches, and the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers. My, my, my, there is an entire sermon in just that one line of text. Those twelve baskets of leftovers, echoing manna from heaven. One basket per disciple. In a land overflowing with that kind of abundance, still nothing shall be wasted.

We are not given to know how the disciples reacted to this miracle. Because, *now* suddenly, Jesus is ready to be gone from this place. He hustles the disciples into their boat and shoves them into the lake and says, *see you in the morning on the other side*. Then he dismisses the crowd and he leaves, *up a mountain, by himself, all alone*. Matthew cares for us to know Jesus wanted to be away from all the humans. All night.

Meanwhile, the disciples never make it to the other side of the lake. *Tossed in the waves of a storm* – your translation might say “battered.” Tossed or battered – the same word is elsewhere translated “tortured.” They were being tortured by nature itself. Maybe they were handling it; some were fishermen, after all. Matthew doesn't note them being afraid until they see Jesus walking on the water toward them. Then they are terrified – screaming, even. They think he's a ghost. He come to them in a way they don't recognize. Maybe they thought salvation was going to be more fun than this. He speaks to them, *take heart. I am.*

Here's Jesus *not* speaking in parables, straight up identifying himself as God. And yet. Peter says, *Lord, if it is really you...?* Does that sound familiar, like an echo of something already in Matthew? If you really are the Son of God. *If you really are the Son of God, turns these stones to bread. If you really are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the Temple.* Only this time, Peter is the tempter; only this time, Jesus complies. Like with bread and fish the day before, Jesus provides.

And Peter walks on water too, until the wind picks up and he remembers that he can't walk on water, and he starts to drown and Jesus has to catch him. *Your faith is little,* Jesus says to Peter. *You thought I would call you out just to let you drown?* That is little faith. Clearly Jesus will work with little faith, right? Otherwise he would have let Peter drown.

Every storm ends eventually. See all thirteen of them huddled in that boat, soaked to the skin, shivering? Then and there they came to faith, Matthew says. *Truly, you are the Son of God.*

Know what I wonder, friends? I wonder if what makes being a Christian so hard is the simple fact that being a human being is hard. Living decently with integrity and dignity and in community with others is such a complicated project. I rather understand why some folks give up and live unto themselves, and that's why the world gets so mired in evil and injustice.

People would do better if they could do better; but being better is such a battle, and human beings are so weak. And we come to the invitation of Christ already weak and overwhelmed – soaked and shivering, if you will – yet still with the desire to be good, to do right, to live decently and well. And we might think it's nothing because it's so shaky that it barely feeds us sometimes. But Jesus says that if we will bring it to him and offer it up with ourselves too – not just the sandwiches, but the labor that goes with serving them – there really will be so much more than we can ever, ever imagine.

Of all that I might fish out of this story today and give you to consider, here are three “fish.”

Fish #1 – Compassion is the everyday Christian response to everyday human suffering. Following Christ well means keeping our hearts open to the everyday suffering of people around us. As tempting as it is to close ourselves off against the chaos of their neediness,

if we can keep our hearts open the compassion of Jesus will keep us full and able. Of course we have to take care of ourselves in all-important ways and use good judgment. But it's easy sometimes to walk around with hard hearts and thin skins, when it's tender hearts and thick skins that are needed to serve needy people for a lifetime.

Fish #2 – Christian compassion is profoundly pragmatic and, sometimes, surprisingly small. We are richer than we want to admit, as persons and as a congregation. We have vast resources at our disposal, friends – vast! – in the bank and in our repertoire. How available those – and we – are to the work that Jesus would assign us is up to us.

Fish #3 – Christ-followers like us require as much compassion as anyone else. Jesus went out onto the lake for the same reason he fed the people on the shore: people he loved needed him. We need him. We get as hungry, angry, lonely, tired and afraid as any Gentiles anywhere ever did. (Well, maybe not as hungry – but you get my point.) We don't have to worry there isn't enough for us, for you. Remember those leftovers – the abundance in that little word?

Friends, once we have seen and heard and tasted the compassion of Jesus in us, the love that leaves us unafraid in the midst of the worst this world can do, I am confident there is nothing we cannot do or will not give for the whole world to see and hear and taste it too.

Would you pray with me?