

Year A Sunday closest to August 3 Proper 13 Matthew 14:13-21  
Preached by Rev. Chris Cole at Trinity Tulsa on 8/2/20 – one service (10 AM livestream)

Good morning, Trinity! In the last three weeks we heard several gospel parables relating to the kingdom of heaven. We heard the parable of the sower three weeks ago, then the parable of the wheat and the weeds the next week, and we ended with several parables, including the parable of the mustard seed, last week. Jesus addresses all these parables “to the crowds,” which is code for potential believers, and from that vantage point, these parables also told us something about Jesus’s relationship with those who came to hear him teach. If Jesus is the sower, then he knows that some of his teachings will find good soil in the crowds, but they won’t take root everywhere. If the kingdom is a wheat field, then the words of Jesus will take root in some and over time transform them into the wheat. Others may remain unconvinced or remain followers of other teachers. The transformative power of Jesus’s words may not be obvious right away. Like a mustard seed, the changes are hard to see, at least at first, and only in time will they grow healthy and large. This is all to say that in the context of Jesus’s ministry the crowds were a mixed bag. They

were full of potential disciples, but there were no guarantees. What's more, there was also the chance that the crowds might turn on him if they didn't like what they heard. There are other stories in the gospels where that's exactly what happens.

So Jesus can't bank on the spiritual maturity and good graces of those who came to hear him, and one might think that would make him distrustful of the crowds. But that's not what happens, and we see that particularly well in our readings for today. Today we are invited to consider God's invitation, caring and compassion for us all. In our reading from Isaiah, we hear that everyone who thirsts may come to the waters, that those without money should still come and eat. It's God's invitation for our care, one that is open to all, regardless of social status or means. In today's psalm, we hear that God, who invites us all to drink and eat, is gracious and full of compassion. Listen again to verse 9 from the psalm: "The Lord is loving to everyone and his compassion is over all his works." And again in verses 16-17: "The eyes of all wait upon you, O Lord, and you give them their food in due season. You open wide your hand and satisfy the needs of every living creature." Isaiah's experience

with God and well as that of the psalmist point to a God who cares about creation, about satisfying the needs of everything that lives in creation. This is an understanding of God as compassionate, as a God who cares.

And we see these attributes of God again at work in our gospel passage. First, we are told that Jesus withdraws from the crowds by taking off on a boat. But the crowds follow him, and they are waiting for him when he comes to shore. And Jesus responds as God would – with compassion. Jesus has compassion for the crowds and expresses this by healing their sick. Why does Jesus behave this way? Because God cares about the welfare of God’s creatures. This is a theological claim. When Jesus cures the sick, it reveals God’s compassion. God’s caring includes our physical needs as well as our spiritual, psychological and emotional needs.

From this perspective, the miracle story that follows isn’t really all that surprising. The disciples tell Jesus that he should send the crowds away, but Jesus once again shows compassion for them. He says that the crowds need not leave, that the disciples should feed them. We only have five loaves and two fish, the disciples say. And so Jesus takes the food,

blesses it, breaks the loaves and gives them to the disciples to distribute to the crowds. **All** ate and **all** were filled, another reminder of God's universal invitation. Now, this meal being provided isn't a fancy one. It's just bread and fish, but this basic meal was enough to satisfy the need of the crowd. Jesus's compassion for the crowd shows God's compassion. We know God cares, because Jesus cares.

The theological point here is important enough that the feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle story to appear in all four gospels. The story makes the case that God wants everyone's basic physical needs to be met. Remember that this crowd being fed represents potential believers only. All of them won't become disciples, but that doesn't matter. God wishes them to receive the basics of life in the here and now. God's compassion for these necessities isn't limited only to the believers. All creatures have received this compassion, whether they know it or not. When believers pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," it's a way of signaling that God is listening and that God cares. But the feeding of the 5000 also makes the point that such provision does not happen passively. If all are to be fed, then disciples have to work to help make it happen. Remember that

Jesus works through his own disciples to distribute the fish and bread. For the prayer “Give us this day our daily bread” to be fulfilled, God requires our active participation.

A friend pointed out to me not too long ago that the Christian tradition is full of sermons about loving our neighbors, but often lack any acknowledgement of just how challenging that really can be. There are times in our lives when we need to create good, strong boundaries, when we need to limit the access that some folks have to us and to our physical spaces. There are folks out there with real challenges in emotional regulation and impulse control. And for us to be in relationship with them, we may have to regulate how, when and where those interactions happen. But as the feeding of the 5000 teaches us and as Trinity’s historical and ongoing experiences with food ministry testifies, being agents of God’s compassion means dealing with the mess that providing for others creates. After 41 years of being housed at our church, Iron Gate moved into its new facility in Downtown Tulsa in August of last year. While at Trinity it averaged serving 561 meals a day. It’s gone up since. In its last full year of operating out of our church, Iron Gate served 204,922 meals. It

also distributed thousands of bags of groceries and kids' packs and utilized the volunteer efforts of 1,483 people. But it wasn't without its challenges. Arguments and fights occasionally broke out among the guests. One day we had multiple drug overdoses occur on the property. The gospel stories don't tell us about those aspects of feeding 5,000, to say nothing of feeding 200,000. Still, food ministry is perhaps one of the clearest examples of God's agents operating in this world to help God's universal compassion become a reality.

And there continue to be Trinity parishioners involved in similar work. Trinity's social justice commission currently provides emergency groceries for several families in need. The Trolls, an offshoot of the Society of St. Lawrence, currently provide meals for kids in the New Hope program, that is, kids who have at least one incarcerated parent. These efforts, too, resonate with the lessons of today's scripture readings.

But the theological point being made in all this, that God extends universal, loving compassion for all, sometimes gets lost when modern people debate the gospel's miracle stories. "Did it really happen," we sometimes want to ask, because that's the kind of question that comes so

naturally to us. And if it did really happen, how did it happen. One theory suggests that the feeding of the 5,000 might have been possible because some of the people would have undoubtedly been carrying provisions with them and if the disciples had asked them to share, the crowd might have discovered that there was actually enough to go around for everyone. But it seems to me that the theological point is the one that really matters here and that feeding 200,000 people out of the basement of this building is pretty miraculous business, too. What's truly important is not so much how it gets done but what it tells us about God's nature when it happens in the everyday world of the here and now. We saw it disclosed in Jesus, when he said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." And they got something to eat. Even those without a penny to spend. They got to eat. That's God's compassion. That's God's caring. How will we know when we are God's agents? In part, it will be when we are the ones holding out the plate, because God has filled us with the desire to give someone else their daily bread.