



You Count!!—TouchPoint for July 29, 2020

Matthew 14:13-21 (NRSV) 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, not counting women and children.

Grace and Peace to you from the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Now when Jesus **HEARD THIS**, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowd **HEARD IT**, they followed him on foot from the towns.” Heard what? It might be important to know. What is it Jesus heard that made him go to a deserted place...and made the people follow him? What is it that Jesus heard that made him have compassion for the town folk and create a meal, a feast for them? What Jesus heard was the story of another feast. A feast put on by king Herod that led to the death of John the Baptist. A feast that stood in sharp contrast to the feast of Jesus.

Here is the story just before our gospel passage.

Herod was King. Now one of the least offensive things King Herod had ever done was to walk off with his brother's wife. Her name was Herodias. At least there may have been something like love in it—but it was against the law, and since John the Baptist was a stickler for that sort of thing, John told Herod, “It is an evil thing you have done.” Needless to say, this didn't endear him to Herodias, Herod's wife. She urged her husband to make short work of John. Herod said he'd be only more than happy to oblige her, but unfortunately, John was a good man with a strong following, and it might lead to some unpleasantness.

All that changed at Herod's birthday party. Herod threw himself a birthday party, probably because he couldn't find anyone else who felt like throwing one for him. It was a wonderful party. Lots of food, lots of drink. It was impressive. He had invited all the royal guests. Anybody who was anybody was there. It was a society page's dream.

One of the guests was Herodias' daughter by her former marriage. Her name was Salome. She was both Herod's step-daughter and his niece. As it so happened, she was also a whiz at dancing. Las Vegas showgirls had nothing on her. She would have been the all-time scoring leader on “Dancing with the Stars.” Sometime during the party she ripped off a little number which so tickled Herod, that, carried away by the moment, he told her he would give her anything she wanted, up to and including half of his kingdom.

Since, she apparently had everything a girl could want, and having no desire for the headaches taking over half the kingdom would involve, she went out and asked for her mother's advice. It didn't take Herodias 10 seconds to answer, "The head of John the Baptist." So Salome went back and told Herod, and requested it be served on a platter. Herod had given his word. It was an impressive offer he had given Salome. He couldn't back down now. He couldn't turn chicken and run. He had to impress the guests.

John was beheaded.

The party, thrown to celebrate life, became a party of death.
The party, thrown to impress others, ended on a depressing note.
The party, thrown for all the beautiful people, ended rather ugly.

Jesus gets the news, and heads out to a lonely place. The people follow him. He has compassion on them and holds a feast. What a different feast it is. The food is not great, just a few fish and some bread. It is not a feast to impress, but everyone leaves satisfied. The people are not the beautiful ones. They are the sick. Those in want and in need.

Even the last verse of this passage is telling.

"And those who ate were about 5,000 men, not counting women and children."

"Not counting women and children." What do we do with that phrase? Chalk it up to ancient male chauvinism. Or is there something more?

"Not counting women and children." Do you hear who is fed in this meal? Do you hear who it is being shared with? Do you hear who is invited to sit down?

"Not counting women and children." Why weren't they counted? They weren't counted because they didn't count. Those who don't count make up the majority of this feast. Those who don't count are invited, shared with, and fed. Anybody who is anybody is probably not at this feast... But those the world has deemed not worth counting, these are the invited guests.

This feast should be a message to the church, and all Christians, that there are no uncountable people. And so when the church decides that it can divide people into redeemable and irredeemable, countable and uncountable, worth and unworthy – it is holding a Herod party and feast, rather than a *Jesus* party and feast. Where does the church get off thinking that is its primary task? To divide people up or separate people out? Jesus didn't come to earth to initiate a new way of counting who's in and who's out. That's what most religion does. Creating a religion about Jesus, that ends up doing the same, is simply putting new wine in old wineskins. And is not what he was about.

Christianity has become a **religion about Jesus**. What do you believe, think, confess? And you will be divided up accordingly. Rather than the **religion of Jesus**. "All are children of our heavenly Abba."

"Follow me" is the operative phrase from Jesus – not "worship me".

The primary purpose of the church is to provide a feast of grace for all. Especially for those who don't count. In whatever way shape or form we can. A FEAST.

That is why I find all this talk about fasting these days from church leaders an interesting development. We are told, in these Covid-19 days, that we should embrace “fasting from Holy Communion” or maybe even from online worship. But fasting is only for those who have a full belly. Fasting is the privilege of the satisfied. One would not dare go into a homeless shelter, a soup kitchen, a bread line, and say... “Hey everybody, let’s fast.” That would be a statement so far out of touch with reality as to boggle the mind.

I only hear this fasting talk from us clergy folks and church higher ups. I have yet to hear these words from a lay person. “I’ve had enough of experiencing Christ presence in the everyday elements of life. I’ve had enough of hearing the gospel, even online. There’s too much community in the world of Zoom. I need to fast.” Now, when I am talking about online worship and communion. I am NOT just talking about online worship and communion. I am using it as a metaphor for how the church understands and see its place and mission in the world.

Look, Christianity doesn’t exist for the sake of Christendom. And Christian practices don’t exist for the sake of Christendom, either. We exist for the sake of the world. To feed the world. To provide a feast for the world. Our faith and our practices need to reflect that, rather than some in-house, self-sanctification parlor game. The Church needs to stop playing church and start *being* the Church.

Now, more than ever, there are people in our midst who are told they don’t belong – they “DON’T COUNT”. They are hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Why Jesus might even call them the “blessed ones.” The idea that we would withhold any form of communication and experience of ‘belonging’ from them, all for the sake of our fasting, is absurd.

When Jesus sees the crowd, he has compassion on them. Their need to be fed overrides his need to fast from them, his need to go to a lonely place. If we don’t feed the people, they will go looking for food somewhere else. And it certainly won’t be the ‘bread of life’ they will find.

Feast or fast? What would you do in the night you were going to be betrayed, denied, run away from? Would you separate yourself from those people? Or would you have compassion? Would you fast from their presence, steeling yourself against the coming onslaught? Or would you prepare a feast for them and with them?

Would you count them amongst your friends, your followers, your disciples? Or would you say they ‘don’t count’ anymore? Would you dismember yourself from them? Or re-member yourself to them?

In the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and said, “Do this to RE-member me.”

This feast is the feast of life, even though given in the night of his death. This feast is not meant to impress, but forgive and offer hope. This feast is not for those who have made it, but for those who don't count. It is not for those whose belly is full, but for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The world may say you don't count. It has a way of doing that. Pushing you aside...to the fringe. But not here, and not now. Here in this meal Christ comes to you and says, “You count.”

Fast from it if you want... you who are so sure you count. And celebrate the luxury of being able to do so. But for those of you who are hungering and thirsting for it...

PARTY ON!!!

Amen.

