



You Count – Touchpoint for August 2, 2023

Matthew 14:13-21 (GNT) Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

¹³ When Jesus heard the news about John, he left there in a boat and went to a lonely place by himself. The people heard about it, and so they left their towns and followed him by land. ¹⁴ Jesus got out of the boat, and when he saw the large crowd, his heart was filled with pity for them, and he healed their sick.

¹⁵ That evening his disciples came to him and said, "It is already very late, and this is a lonely place. Send the people away and let them go to the villages to buy food for themselves."

¹⁶ "They don't have to leave," answered Jesus. "You yourselves give them something to eat!"

¹⁷ "All we have here are five loaves and two fish," they replied.

¹⁸ "Then bring them here to me," Jesus said. ¹⁹ He ordered the people to sit down on the grass; then he took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, and gave thanks to God. He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ Everyone ate and had enough. Then the disciples took up twelve baskets full of what was left over. ²¹ The number of men who ate was about five thousand, not counting the women and children.

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery 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 what did the people hear that made them want to 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 stepdaughter and his niece.

As it so happened, she was also a whiz at dancing. Las Vegas showgirls had nothing on her. 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.

Game of Thrones had nothing on this crowd.

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 hears the news, and heads out to a lonely place. The people hear the news and 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. 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 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...

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's why I find all the “inside the bubble” talk about communion in churches to be boring and irrelevant. Who's allowed? Who isn't? Who can join and who can't?

How do we keep this meal pure and holy for the sake of the church?

Look, Christianity doesn't exist for the sake of Christendom. And Christian practices don't exist for the sake of Christendom, either. Holy Communion was made for people, not people for Holy Communion. Though most church leaders get that wrong.

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 experience of 'belonging' from them, is absurd.

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.

John W. Gardner wrote, "We can keep ourselves so busy, fill our lives with so many diversions, stuff our heads with so much knowledge, involve ourselves with so many people and cover so much ground that we never have time to probe the fearful and wonderful world within... By middle life most of us are accomplished fugitives from ourselves."

So, what might the church have to offer these people and this kind of world?

What can the church offer to those who have become fugitives to themselves? Who have dis-membered themselves from themselves, their true selves, and the ONE in whom they live and move and have their being?

Might there be some ritual, some act, that will RE-MEMBER all that has been dis-membered in our world?

Might there be a party that the church could throw that would lead to a re-membering of life and not death?

I saw a bumper sticker recently. It said, "Life is a party. Party on."

OK. Let's go with it. What kind of party are we throwing? What kind of party are we participating in? A party of life or a party of death? A party to impress or a party to share?

Who are we counting? Who are we not counting? Whose party would you rather go to? It's tough to turn down a party thrown by a king.

Fortunately you don't have to... Every week we are invited to a party, a feast. It is thrown by the king. And no I am not talking about Herod, or Elvis, or even LeBron.

It is thrown by THE king. King Jesus. The suffering king. The servant king.

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.

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."

Amen.

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)
Be Still, know that I am God

To Everything There is a Season

(The Concordia Choir, Rene' Clausen)

To everything turn, turn, turn. There is a season turn, turn, turn.
And a time for every purpose under Heaven A time to be born, a time to die.
A time to plant, a time to reap. A time to kill, a time to heal. A time to laugh, a time to weep. *Refrain*
A time to build up, a time to break down. A time to dance, a time to mourn.
A time to cast away stones. A time to gather stones together. *Refrain*
A time of love, a time of hate. A time of war, a time of peace.
A time you may embrace. A time to refrain from embracing. *Refrain*
A time to gain, a time to lose. A time to rain, a time to sow.
A time for love, a time for hate. A time for peace, I swear it's not too late.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Will You Come and Follow Me (The Summons)

(John L. Bell, The Cathedral Singers)

Will you come and follow me, If I but call your name? Will you go where you don't know,
And never be the same? Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known?
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name? Will you care for cruel and kind,
And never be the Same? Will you risk the hostile stare, Should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see, If I but call your name? Will you set the prisoners free, And never be the same? Will you kiss
the leper clean, And do such as this unseen, And admit to what I mean, In you and you in me?
Will you love the 'You' you hide, If I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside,
And never be the same? Will you use the faith you've found, To reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound, In you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true, When you but call my name. Let me turn and follow you,
And never be the same. In your company I'll go, Where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow, In you and you in me.

The Meal

Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, Salisbury Cathedral Boys Choristers, Salisbury Cathedral Lay Vicars, David Halls)

Benediction

God Be With You 'Til We Meet Again

(Discovery Singers)

God be with you till we meet again; By his counsels guide, uphold you; With his sheep securely fold you.
God be with you till we meet again. Amen