

*Based on Matthew 14:13-16. Jesus Responds to Tyrannical Power*

What do we do when tyrannical power appears to win the day? That is the question before us this morning.

Do we run for cover? Do we cling to a savior? Do we blame the powers that be for being *the powers that be*? Or do we roll up our sleeves and get to work, healing the sick, repairing the harm, feeding the hungry, expanding the movement for justice and peace through nonviolent radical love?

If our Lesson this morning offers any wisdom, the answer must be all of the above.

When tyrannical power takes the life of John the Baptist, grief and fear and anger loom large. Jesus, himself, must take a break, cross the sea, into the wilderness, to lick his own wounds, to gather his own thoughts, to pray, to assess, to cry, and, we hope, to re-commit to the journey ahead.

That break does not last long, as grief and fear and anger propel the crowds to follow on foot, desperate for some form of relief for their pain. If tyrannical power can take the life of John, they fear, it can also take the life of me. And they are right.

All of which moves Jesus to *compassion*, our Lesson says. To suffer with. To feel with. To seek relief for. To care. *The simple act of caring*, we have learned, is, itself, *heroic*. Lo and behold, when Jesus is moved to compassion, his power to heal, which has just been rejected and rendered impotent in his own hometown, again flows freely, abundantly among the sick.

Sickness in the biblical world, we must remember is more than a physical ailment, although it is indeed that. Sickness in the biblical world is a symptom of that same tyrannical power they fear. A power that exploits the wealth of the land for a powerful few and leaves nothing but crumbs for ones to whom the land actually belongs. Sickness in the biblical world is about poverty and lack of housing and unequal access to health care. Sickness in the biblical world is about a disease of the collective spirit that collaborates with and perpetuates tyrannical power instead of resisting it together through non violent radical love.

The simple act of caring is, we have been told, heroic. When Jesus is moved to compassion, his power to heal flows freely, abundantly among the sick.

We assume this must be true for the disciples, as well, although it is not recorded in this particular Lesson. We have already been told in the tenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel that Jesus has equipped the disciples *to cure every disease and every sickness*. We have already been told in the chapters that follow that Jesus has sent the disciples out two by two - without Jesus present - to practice the healing power with which he has equipped them. By the time we get to our Lesson today, the disciples should be well prepared to join Jesus in his ministry of healing.

But then they drop the ball.

Time to send the crowds home, the disciples say, there is no way to feed them all. To which Jesus replies, *You* give them something to eat. And, they do, albeit with some mumbling and grumbling along the way. And they expand the movement for justice and peace, living as if the very realm of God were coming to earth as it is in heaven. And they do it again. And again. And again. And again.

The church must do the same.

Yes, it does appear tyrannical power has won the day. I refuse to sugarcoat it. Life is about to get very hard for the immigrant, for the trans community, for the federal employee, not just in a theoretical sense, but in a communal sense right here at SPC. This is personal! If the last four days of pastoral counseling are any indication, our own people are scared. Some within our own congregation are already considering the need to leave their jobs. Some within our own congregation are already considering the need to leave the state. Some in our own congregation are even considering the need to leave the country once the work visa expires and the deportation order comes through.

For the rest of us, it is perfectly natural to seek solace in the boat with Jesus, along the water, through the wilderness. In fact, it is essential. Where but on the waters of chaos can we find the peace that passes understanding? Where but in the wilderness of wild things can we find the grace that keeps this world?

Even Jesus, once the sick have been healed and multiple crowds have been fed, eventually returns to the boat by himself. He cannot keep doing what he does without it. But eventually, and sooner perhaps than any of us feel ready for, others in the crowd will need us to be and become the people of radical compassion we say we want to be and become. Right here at SPC. Right here in the Eastern Panhandle. And truly, if we are paying attention, all around the world. When we think it is time to give up, Jesus tells us, *You* give them something to eat.

Our Deacons, as you have seen in your bulletin insert, as here to help. Like the disciples, they are being equipped to *share the care* throughout the congregation, to pause over one another with *a few dimes of light*, or spend long minutes in the darkness with you, *speaking consolation, maybe even singing*.

But they cannot do it alone, nor can I. The ministry of radical compassion - of healing, of restoring, of feeding, of expanding the movement for justice and peace - belongs to us all, one beggar to another, rattling our cup for spare grace - *and receiving it!*

Friends, when tyrannical power appears to win the day our ministry becomes even more essential. To be and become people of radical compassion, working for justice and wholeness in ourselves and in the world. To heal and repair and feed and expand the movement of nonviolent loving resistance to tyrannical power over and over and over again. To preach and teach and teach and live as if the very realm of God has come on earth, as it is in heaven: where all has been healed and all has been restored and all has been made well.

Friends, the church was made for *this* moment!