

Sermon Aug 2 2020
Pastor Michael Linderman
Redeemer, Ramsey

Matthew 14:13-21

Grace, Mercy and Peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Dear partners in ministry, thank you for your support, prayers over these many weeks.

Thanks for coming to in-person worship outside last Sunday.

It went very well, as we gathered out on the parking lot.

A big thank you to our volunteers, John Manke, Judith Schaefer, Gerhart Lempp and Dean Cartier.

We do apologize for our technical difficulties. We lost our livestream signal to Facebook because we were too far away from the building. We learn as we go.

Speaking of learning as we go, please look forward to in-person worship INSIDE in our sanctuary,

Aug 16, at 9:30am. This will be a trial run for future in-person worship. We will see how it goes, and if it goes well, we will schedule another one in September.

A deserted place...

As I worked to prepare this sermon, I was drawn to the image of this deserted place that Jesus winds up in, with about 10,000 people in tow. I have felt drawn to talk about the church, as a people of God, wandering to a far-off place in order to follow Jesus.

I want to talk about being in a deserted place. In all my travels, the farthest away from civilization that I've traveled was a camping trip with my college roommate to the Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness. This national park is over 1 million acres of pristine forest, lakes and streams that straddles the border between northern Minnesota and Ontario, Canada. For 7 days, we didn't come across anyone else, but lots of wildlife and fish. Traveling in a twenty-five mile loop, we canoed across several lakes, and underwent some grueling portages, where we

had to carry our canoe and gear through the woods to get from one lake to the next. I remember how quiet it was, how peaceful, and also how much work it was to travel through that area. The farthest we got into the park put us several miles from any contact with human civilization. In retrospect, it could be more precarious, a bit more dangerous, and lonely, if you were traveling alone, became injured, or got lost.

That experience of traveling far from the rest of civilization, and the precarious nature of such travel, is what comes to mind when I think of the description of Jesus going off to a deserted place in today's gospel lesson. As Matthew describes the context, Jesus wanted some time alone, mostly to process the slap in the face that was the execution of John the Baptist. John was his commrad in the pursuit of God's Kingdom. John's execution was a warning sign to Jesus, a harbinger of the danger that lay in wait for a prophet who was set on speaking truth to power. Jesus wanted some time away to process and to grieve. But he was followed by a huge crowd of people. Matthew reports there were about 5000 men. Make that double for women and children, and you have an easy estimate of about 10,000 people. So, instead of leaving civilization behind for a while, civilization came to him. And surely, those in power, those who might have eyes and ears out in the more remote villages, heard about, or maybe even watched this crowd travel and gather out in that deserted place.

For many of those people, this must have been a somewhat hasty, maybe even impulsive thing to do. Where's the teacher going? To the wilderness? Well, ok, I guess I'll go with him. Are you going to go? Well, I want to hear what he has to say. Alright, let's go together. Many surely didn't realize until late into the expedition how far away they had traveled to get to where Jesus was. And it was a bit precarious out there. No food. Maybe very little water. And a long, long walk to get back home.

For some reason, in these days of summer, I'm just drawn in by this image of Jesus joined by this crowd, in this deserted place, and surrounded by the precariousness of it all.

I think I'm drawn to think of that deserted place like a fitting metaphor for the church at this time. Are you feeling the precariousness of your life right now? Are you feeling like you are out in the wilderness, not literally, but figuratively? Do

you feel removed or farther from the things that used to comfort you in the past? Maybe you're feeling vulnerable, to a sense of hopelessness, vulnerable to the virus, vulnerable to its effects on our life, and the mental fatigue from constantly looking for signs of an end to the pandemic that never comes.

I think we are in a precarious spot these days, out in a deserted place, even though we may be literally surrounded by people. Indeed, not being able to get away from people, especially those who don't seem concerned about possible exposure to the virus, is one of our main causes of stress. But it is the spiritual vulnerability, the spiritual precariousness, that I am concerned to address today. Out in this wilderness, where our future is not secure, where we don't know exactly what happens next, and our present is filled with questions we can't answer, in this spiritual wilderness, the air is thinner here, the sun harsher, the road more rocky, and we have no provisions in sight. We are exposed, exposed to the fear, frustration and despair that comes from being tired of this virus and its effects on us all. We are exposed to the raw anger and fear rippling through our national, political and social fabric. And particularly the church is feeling exposed. We are moved to respond in compassion to those who want change, and yet scared to meet the resistance of those who want no change at all. Forced as we are to be "together apart", we are wondering what God is asking of us in these times of turmoil and trial.

Well, according to the story in today's Gospel lesson, the people following Jesus just dive right in. They simply follow wherever he goes. They go into the wilderness, into the deserted place that they've been told, Jesus has retreated to. Yes, The church is really the crowd that follows, or is supposed to follow Jesus wherever he goes. And these days, the places we may find ourselves in, in our heart and minds, when we think about trying to follow Jesus, indeed seem remote. Out here in this remote field of faith, there seems to be too many rocks and not enough shade. We start to sense that we are tired of the noise of the fights and battles of the self-righteously invested. There seems to be too much outrage, not enough humility. Too much selfishness, not enough sacrifice, too much defensiveness, not enough love. Out here in this field of faith, we find we are a parched people, a church that is tired of the journey, but wondering also where the sustenance for the return will come from. How do we get back into the world, into life, and where do we find hope?

Well, I think you can see where we're going with this extended metaphor of being with Jesus in the deserted place. The key for the church is to remember that you may be in a deserted place, but also, you are with Jesus. Things may seem remote, things may seem precarious, the land you are in may seem parched and the sun may scorch, but that rumbling in your belly, that hunger in your soul, for kindness, for compassion, for love, for justice, for forgiveness and reconciliation, for grace, for mercy, for peace among all beings, that hunger is what Jesus comes to fill.

Christians are called to follow the master, even in such challenging times. Following Jesus means sometimes wandering with him into the wilderness, to a remote place.

But there he cares for us. He feeds us. There he provides for us. He takes what we have and blesses it. That's the lesson of the 5 loaves and 2 fish. What the people have on their own is not enough, but when Jesus blesses it, it becomes more than what they need.

The other lesson in this story is that Jesus also calls the disciples into service. He says, in essence, take what you have, which I have blessed, and give it away! In the face of their doubt and inaction, in the precariousness of the wilderness, Jesus tells them they have work to do! The bounty of the kingdom is there in that act, in that practice of giving away to others what Jesus has blessed in us. It's God's work, and we are to use our hands.

One more lesson from my trip to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area wilderness with my friend. It was right after our graduation from college. My roommate and I had recently become renewed in our faith, and we were both in the beginning stages of considering how we were called by God into ministry, and whether or not to go to seminary. Into that wilderness, among all the provisions we packed into our backpacks, we also brought a pocket sized Gideons New Testament and Psalms. I still remember the two of us, sitting on a rock on the shore of a lake, reading through the Gospel of John out loud, and talking for hours about what we thought it meant. All the while, and in our spiritual wilderness of an unforeseeable future, Jesus was feeding us through his Word. Food for the journey, for the journey I am still on. And Jesus' word is still our food for our journey together as church.

The church will survive this time. You and I will survive this time of testing and trial. But we do and will continue to feel sometimes like we are in a deserted place, and all we have to support us is Jesus himself, and his command to serve others from what we have. In the words of our hymn of the day, "Then let the servant church arise, a caring church, that longs to be a partner in Christ's sacrifice, and clothed in Christ's humanity." Let us go forth into the world, because we trust that the grace of God animates our ministries, not because we're so good or courageous, but because God is so good. And may the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.