

## DEO Sermon

Matthew 14:13-21

Feeding of the Five Thousand (Men, plus women and children!)

Well, it's not often that a musician gets to preach. Well, I should say, preach with words. For, as I said to a good friend just last week, musicians don't really preach, they do.

Now I confess that I'm always tempted to pontificate about things like music as metaphor, or whether music is mystical or not (the answer is NOT—I'd be happy to talk with you later about this). But I won't. Particularly on a Sunday with such a cornerstone Gospel text.

When we encounter this story, Matthew had been, in the course of structuring his gospel, recounting many parables of Jesus. The disciples were struggling to understand, and asked Jesus to help them. They questioned him about speaking in parables, rather than plain language. Jesus replied that this is what the people need: "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand."

(Matthew 13:13) But all of this is interrupted with the death of John the Baptist, or the Baptist, as he was called when I was a wee-one. Jesus is clearly deeply affected by this, for he goes off alone to the desert to deal with it. This is classic introvert behavior—I'd never thought of Jesus as an introvert, but he so clearly is!—and I really identify with it: when I am overwhelmed, I need to isolate myself from others so that I can process,

and hopefully rejuvenate. This is partly a brain chemistry thing having to do with neural transmitters, and so on. But really, what I think Matthew is setting us up for is a search for spiritual nourishment.

So, Jesus is alone, trying to deal with the death of his cousin. The crowd interrupts his “alone time.” But “he had compassion for them,” Matthew says. Compassion means to “suffer with.” So often we hear people talk about ‘following your passion,’ as if passion will bring you joy. But really, your passion is something that is so important to you that you are willing to suffer for it. “Passio” is Latin for suffering. Jesus suffered to the point of death; he died for his passion. And those who have compassion, come alongside and suffer with others. This crowd is suffering. Jesus foregoes his own suffering and gives to the people in need. This bears repeating. Jesus is suffering when this crowd arrives. But he finds their need greater than his own.

But what is it that they need? What is it they are looking for? For much of the day, Jesus heals the sick among the crowd. But the crowd does not disperse. It lingers. All through the day, it lingers. It’s like they’re searching for something more. Well, I’m sure some are there for the show. Everyone likes a good spectacle. But you don’t stay all day just to be titillated. These people stay to the point where the disciples confront Jesus and tell him the people need to be sent away at least to get food. Here’s where things get tricky. Because Jesus tells the disciples to give them food.

Now of course we are talking about actual food. But I also think we're talking about spiritual nourishment. This is not a spoken parable; this is an enacted parable. And seems to prefigure the Holy Sacrament itself, wherein we consume actual bread and wine, and yet are given grace from God through the real presence of Christ himself.

Earlier I joked about how musicians don't preach, they do. Well, I should confess it's not really a joke. Because I think what we are about, when we are at our best, is providing spiritual sustenance for others. And yes, we find sustenance in the act of giving, but it requires an orientation of thought that says, "The flock is more important than I am." Because liturgical music is not about any one individual, rather it is about supporting and aiding the worship of the gathered congregation.

So, when the disciples say, "Exqueueze me, but all we got is 5 loaves and 2 fish," can't you identify with that? O'kay, let's back up a bit. One thing that I've always sort of overlooked is that St. Peter is given two specific, yet interrelated tasks by Jesus. They are: 1) Feed My Sheep. And 2), at the Last Supper, Jesus says to Peter, "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." (Of course, I memorized it in the King James, because I was raised by fundamentalists: "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not; and thou, when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.") I have always found that use of "converted" interesting. Like Peter, who already believes, is still being converted. (Belief does not equal conversion!) How Anglican is Jesus?! Well, I shouldn't say, overlooked this, merely that I hadn't put it all together before.

So, Peter is given this seemingly impossible task—feeding Jesus’ “sheep;” strengthening the “brethren.” And here, in this isolated place, the disciples are given an impossible task: feeding upwards of 10,000 - 15,000 people, if Matthew’s estimate of 5,000 “men” is to be trusted. You and I are given an impossible task: feeding each other with the spiritual food that really comes from God. Yet what does Jesus do? He says, what have you got? They say, five loaves and two fish. I say, what have you got? Sometimes, like at St. Mark’s, you have a professional calibre Cathedral Choir. And sometimes you have a community choir, where all are welcome, including some who can’t read music; like the Women’s Choir at St. Mark’s. What have they all got? Themselves. Their talents. Their dedication. Their commitment. Their faith that Jesus can take whatever we offer, like the disciples. And perform a miracle with it.

(Parenthetically, I don’t really care about the mechanics of where all that food came from. I believe in miracles—or, at least the possibility of miracles. The fact that this story is told in so many different forms, and at least in Luke, two different versions—or are they actually different stories? don’t ask me—makes it a miracle we can’t ignore. But mostly, I believe in the miracle of a life formed and transformed by the worship of God in Jesus Christ. And the role music can play, when we offer it to Jesus, like those five little loaves and those two little fish.)

Our call is to bring what we have, offer it to Jesus, and let him do something amazing with it. Because what we have to offer is real, spiritual nourishment. Food that strengthens.

So, let's talk practicalities. I grew up in a capital "F" Fundamentalist subculture. Of course there were difficulties for me. Anyone who tries to excel, either intellectually or artistically, is distrusted by fundamentalists, because they are seen as different from the group. And fundamentalism, by its very definition, is about defending and defining the group. Defending the group against difference, both within and without.

But, there were some lovely things about this subculture. One of them is a real volunteer ethos. Particularly among the musicians. A volunteer ethos that sees tremendous value in making church music for the love of it.

This is the point where I depart from my background, though. Because I firmly believe that we shouldn't limit our imagination. We shouldn't limit what God can do. We must continually seek for exciting ways in which to both enhance and express the liturgical texts. Look for deeper meanings in the psalter. Encourage your congregation and your musicians to reach beyond. To strive for the extraordinary. Because if we have faith, we can rest assured that Jesus will do something miraculous with it.

And I think I need to be very clear about what I think that miracle will be. I don't think that one will wake up one morning and all of a sudden, with no work or preparation, be ready to sing, "The trumpet shall sound," from Handel's *Messiah*. No. This miracle is that our gift to God will resound as a gift to our congregations. And that Jesus can and will use what we offer to transform our worship into enacted parables. Our singing, our chanting, our playing, can become real sacraments. Physical manifestations of the

grace through which God forms and transforms both us and our congregations to serve both God and the world around us.

Four years ago, we took the youth choir from St. Mark's to New York. As part of our pilgrimage, we volunteered to serve at the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, run by Holy Apostles Church in Chelsea, Manhattan. This program feed more than 5,000 meals a week. Now, back in the 1990's, Holy Apostles suffered a fire. And as part of the renovations, they removed the pews, and replaced them with flexible seating—chairs that can be stacked and stored. So that the homeless and street involved are fed in the church. Not some fellowship hall, or other room down in the basement, and out of sight. No, they sit at the Table.

We had volunteered to help serve lunch, but Holy Apostles told us that they had plenty of volunteers. They wanted us to sing! When we arrived, and were told the story of the soup kitchen, and saw that the meals were being served in the church, one of my young women said, "We're not singing for lunch. We're singing for communion."

I want to do her one better. We are not just singing for communion. Singing is communion.

Amen.