

Devotion: July 30, 2020

Matthew 14:1-21

At that time Herod the ruler* heard reports about Jesus; and he said to his servants, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.’³ For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because John had been telling him, ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’⁵ Though Herod* wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet.⁶ But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask.⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.’⁹ The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given;¹⁰ he sent and had John beheaded in the prison.¹¹ The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother.¹² His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.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, besides women and children.

Shiva is the Jewish custom of mourning. From ancient times, families sat together to mourn those who passed on. Matthew is the only one of the four gospels that mentions John’s death as the incentive for Jesus to seek peace and quiet in a “remote place.

In today’s reading we see Jesus stricken with grief over John’s death. As most likely one of John’s closest relatives, cousin Jesus might have taken part in order to sit shiva after John’s death. But John had been beheaded by Herod, and it’s not clear if his body has been released to his relatives. Would Jesus have taken part? We don’t know. All we know is that Jesus has received the news of John’s murder, and stricken with worry, pain, and grief, Jesus withdraws in a boat to a deserted place to be by himself for a while, to mourn and to pray.

Yet, when others, whether followers, admirers, or concerned folk who know him, hear of what has happened, they have compassion for him, and they follow him. They will not leave him alone in his grief. And like an unconventional family, they sit with him in his pain. Some may have followed him simply because he fascinated them, others may have sought his healing power, still others may only have wanted to be around him. But Matthew seems to indicate that this was no ordinary teaching moment. In fact, not one of the four scriptures mention Jesus teaching at all, which would have been disallowed during a mourning period. But the people simply seem to sit with him, to be with him, to be present for him in his grief.

In the Jewish shiva tradition, the “tzedakah” is a custom of giving to the poor in order to honor the dead. It is part of the duty of the next of kin, the relatives of the dead. While friends and community feel it their great mitzvah (sacred and compassionate duty) to come to support and comfort the bereaved in their grief, it is the host’s mitzvah to offer an honorary meal, and tzedakah.

For Jesus, feeding the multitude was the best and most heartfelt way that he could honor his cousin John, John’s ministry, and everything he stood for.

Today, we are experiencing our own time of grieving. Some may have lost direct relatives and friends to COVID-19 or other diseases. Others may simply be experiencing the mass grief, sadness, and disillusionment of our current world, in which our fear of it has become a daily reminder.

Collective grief can be a debilitating for community and world. It can result in depression, suicide, anger, uprisings, hopelessness, illness, destructiveness, and disinterest. Yet hope rises from understanding that to serve with compassion both honors and heals grief.

Jesus healed himself, even as he healed the crowd before him. He fed his own emotional needs, even as he fed those around him on that hillside. He cured his wounded soul, even as he saved the world with compassion and mercy.

Jesus – is at times called the “suffering servant.” But in this particular scripture today, we can truly see what that means. For Jesus knew that life always conquers death, that whether we suffer from sadness, grief, illness, or conflict, the answer lies in mercy, love, compassion, and service. When we love the world, we come to serve the world. When we serve the world, we come to love the world.

Later, Jesus would grieve again before his agonizing death. But this time, everyone would desert him. And still, on the cross, in suffering and pain, Jesus would serve the world and save the world.

Jesus is the Life. The Way. The Truth. Follow him, serve the world, and you too will be saved.

*Make us worthy, Lord,
To serve our fellow men
Throughout the world who live and die
In poverty or hunger.
Give them through our hands
This day their daily bread,
And by our understanding love
Give peace and joy.
—Mother Teresa of Calcutta*