

August 6, 2023

St. Matthew 14:13-21:

“To Receive Help for the Helpless”

- I. Things Remain the Same.
- II. His Compassion.
- III. Help That Feeds Us.

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St. Matthew 14:13-21

Dear Friends in Christ,

I'm thinking it would be reasonable to say that most here are familiar with the statement, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." The author of that statement was 19th century French writer, Jean-Baptist Alphonse Karr. "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

Arnold Bennett, English author who wrote *How to Live on Twenty-four Hours a Day* was approached by a lady who gave him all kinds of compliments about his book. She said, "And now, thanks to you and your book, I'm going to concentrate." "On what?" asked Bennett. "Oh," said the lady, "on lots of things." Sounds like much of life, doesn't it? Lot's of things, but much of it with little meaning.

Or maybe we could sum it all up in the cry of the woman who said to her pastor, "I have everything to live for, and yet I'm not happy. What's wrong with me?" And the pastor replied, "You've made a small but tragic mistake. You have not everything to live for. You've got a bunch of junk to live with."

Empty feelings. Stressful living. Guilt and regrets. Fear and inner conflict. We can dance around issues all we want, but these are the things that painfully weave their way into our lives. For all our efforts to make this world a "better place" are we any closer than we were, say, 20 years ago? 50 years ago? Ever!? *The more things change, the more they stay the same.* We're here . . .

TO RECEIVE HELP FOR THE HELPLESS

I. Things Remain the Same.

Our text begins, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself (v.13)." What he heard was the news of the murder of John the Baptist. As we know, there's a list of Old Testament prophets who suffered and were murdered because of God's Word. There's a list of the beginning New Testament disciples who suffered and were murdered because of God's Word. It's still the same; there's a long list of New Testament disciples down to the present who have suffered and were murdered because of God's Word.

Some time before the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus was approached by a Pharisee named Nicodemus who, we're told, was "a ruler of the Jews (Jn.3:1)." Jesus said to him, "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works are evil (Jn.3:)." *People loved the darkness rather than light.* They still do.

Some time after the feeding of the five thousand Jesus had a conversation with a small group of people who criticized Him. We're told, "For not even His brothers believed in him (Jn.7:5)." Jesus said to them, "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil (Jn.7:7)." It's still the same. As Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts." Well, that, alone, condemns everyone. "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person (Mt. 15:19,20)." It's still the same.

You see? All these centuries have passed with changes in boundaries, customs, languages, technology. But war, violence, filth, narcissism, torment, murder, corruption have...well...they're still the same. The more things change, the more they stay the same. And in every culture, every generation (because each generation thinks it has all the answers), every election, the promise is still a delusion: "Things are going to get better." Do they? Will they? Have you studied Scripture? Do you really understand what's happening? George Santayana's thought is interesting: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." However, it's not about remembering. It's about the flaw of human sin and the fact that, as Jesus said, "...people loved the darkness rather than light because their works are evil." Humans cannot help themselves. They need help. And so, Jesus made His way to the desolate place and we're told . . .

II. His Compassion.

But when the crowds heard this, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went on shore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick (13b,14).

We have an understanding of the word "compassion", but it is important to note the the definition: "...to bear, suffer...sympathetic consciousness of others' distress with a desire to alleviate it (Webster)." All our distress, and finally death and hell are the consequence of sin. But in Christ's bloody death, the debt of our sin has been fully paid. In Christ, God's Word assures us, "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgression from us (Ps.103:10-12)." Infinitely far!

Martin Luther wrote:

The incarnate Son of God (God in the flesh) is the cloak...in which the Divine Majesty with all his gifts presents Himself to us. Therefore no sinner is so miserable that he dare not venture to present himself before God with the certain confidence of attaining forgiveness. This is the only view of the Godhead which is easy and possible in this life (What Luther Says, Concordia Publishing House, p.160).

III. Help That Feeds Us.

Our text continues:

"Now when it was evening the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a desolate place, and the day is now over, send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' But Jesus said, 'They need not go away; you find them something to eat. They said to him, 'We have only five loaves here and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me. (vv.15-18)."

We know the rest of the account: "And they all ate and were satisfied...and those who ate were about five thousand men, besides woman and children (v.21)." Including the women and children the final number surely increased by thousands.

It is interesting to note that John's Gospel tells us that the crowd followed Him "because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick (Jn.6:2)." We are to understand that the signs, the miracles, testified to the fact that Jesus is God in the flesh. There is no promise that if our faith is great enough we will be healed while on earth. Our afflictions and disappointments remind us that this is still a fallen world. What we have in Christ through Word and Sacraments points us to eternal healing, joy and life.

And how could we not take with us and present to others the words given to us: Christ's mercy "has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...(I Pt. 1:43,4)."

And how could we not put it in front of us and in front of this world which is fading and will pass away, these words the Lord gave to us through the Apostle John: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (Rev.2:3,4).

And there's something else from Luther, powerful and familiar words for the many times we feel like we're much of nothing and going mostly nowhere:

It is the nature of God to make something out of nothing. Consequently, if someone is not nothing, God can make nothing out of him. Men make something into something else. But this is vain and useless work. Thus God accepts no one except the abandoned, makes no one healthy except the sick, gives no one sight except the blind, brings no one to life except the dead, makes no one pious except sinners, makes no one wise except the foolish, and in short, has mercy on no one except the wretched, and gives no one grace except those who have not grace...

It's rather simple. This world rips into our walk with the Lord. The more we know and learn to apply God's Word to our lives the clearer we will understand our walk through this world and preparation for our eternal home. The words of the Psalmist are so very critical for this moment:

How sweet are your promises to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.
Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path (Ps.119:103-105).

Your Word; the written and visible Word (the Sacraments); ***Help For The Helpless***.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott