

Dance of Abundance

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

9th Sunday after Pentecost - August 2, 2020

Texts: Isaiah 55:1-5, Psalm 145:8-9,14-21; Matthew 14:13-21

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 55:1-5

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for God has glorified you.

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21

Our God is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The Beloved is good to all, with compassion over all creation.

You uphold all who are falling, and raise up the oppressed.

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.

GOSPEL READING Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod, 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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Keep these words in your heart. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. **Thanks be to God.**

His cousin and close ally had been arrested on trumped-up charges, illegally detained, summarily executed, and his mutilated body exposed to public humiliation. What motivated their mutual

enemy? Political ambition? Pride? Inability to admit he'd made a mistake? Whatever. When your colleague in the movement meets a swift and brutal end, it makes you wonder. Should you run? Hide? Retaliate? Set fire to enemy headquarters? Or do you double down on what you were up to before, attracting bigger crowds, garnering more attention?

That's what Jesus did. Herod the puppet king, tool of the occupying Romans, inflamed by lust for his own dancing step daughter, tricked by his own wife, caved in to a politically opportunistic demand for John the Baptist's head. On a platter. It was served up as the last grisly course in a royal banquet. Aren't you glad you weren't there? A child's dance led to death.

It's no accident that Matthew follows this story of one banquet turned bloody with another, happier, banquet. Jesus, full of compassion, meets the crowds, heals their sick, and feeds them - 5000 men, plus women and children. Feeds them all with five loaves of broken bread and two fish. Don't you wish you'd been there? Simpler fare than the king's, but a lot healthier. The contrast between the dance of death and this dance of abundance is intentional.

Something else is intentional in Matthew's story: What Jesus did after he heard about his cousin's death and before he fed the crowd. It's the linch pin, the link, the key that connects and unlocks both stories: "Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." Jesus went off alone to pray. He wasn't running, he wasn't hiding, he wasn't hatching a scheme for revenge. He went to expose himself to God. To lay his raw, grieving soul before God. To learn what to do next. To find in God the peace that clearly was not forthcoming anywhere else.

In doing this, he modeled the first essential in nonviolent resistance: When atrocities occur, turn inward. Let God see your pain. Let God love you. Find the peace at your center. Then go out and *be* peace. *Be* love. *Be* the change. Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, was the one who picked up in Jesus what a lot of Christians miss: Nonviolence is not the path to inner peace; it's the fruit of it.

Let me tell you a story about Mr. Tanaka. Tanaka-san, as his devoted younger colleagues called him. He radiated inner peace. I met him in Tokyo, in 1981. A cultured man who spoke excellent English, Tanaka-san wasn't just the boss; he was mentor, teacher, friend. He was best man at their weddings, godfather to their children. He arranged for them to learn conversational English in the evenings, from me. One night the talk turned to hometowns. These highly skilled engineers had come from all over Japan to work at this prestigious company; each shared some point of pride in their native place. "And what about you, Mr. Tanaka?" I asked. "I come from Hiroshima," he said. Oh. Ohhhh... And then, very gently, he said, "Jan, my family all died that day. I was away at school. I was the only one who survived." What can you say to that? I'm sorry? I didn't do it? I wasn't even born? In that moment, the grief and the guilt that transcend generations flattened me, crushed me. Tanaka-san knew, I think, what I was feeling. His understanding educated me. How is it possible to experience trauma so profound and remain so

loving, so compassionate, so generous? His faith was Buddhist and Shinto, not Christian, but he knew inner peace. He lived it. Great suffering taught him great love. He lived that, too.

This week Thursday will be the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. I find it interesting that the numbers who died that day and in the months that followed are roughly equal to the number of Americans who have died of COVID-19, though the events of August 6, 1945, are unrivaled for sheer horror and destruction. That didn't end in 1945. In Japan in 1981, I learned that people who had been children during World War II were dying young, often of heart attacks, their systems weakened by the deprivation of those grim war years. This week I learned that many young people with relatively mild cases of the virus are left with damaged hearts, too.

There are no coincidences. There is only the meaning we take, the meaning we make, the meaning we draw from what we see, hear, learn for ourselves. And so I wonder, what about our hearts today? Not the physical but the spiritual heart? What about the heart of our nation? How do we deal with horror and tragedy? Do we run? Hide? Shut our eyes and stop our ears? Start planning whom to attack, whom to blame? Or can great suffering lead us instead to great love?

I find it interesting, too, that Representative John Lewis died even as American citizens battled agents of their own government in their own city. Lewis's death drew attention to his life: not only was he a human rights activist and the conscience of Congress. He was also a witness to nonviolence as the necessary instrument of change. His final public words urge us to resist racism and injustice always, and strenuously, but by peaceful means. He said, "Let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide." He *was* a Christian.

Gandhi believed that the force of active nonviolence was more powerful than all nuclear weapons combined and that if we all practiced it, we could unleash a spiritual explosion more powerful than the bombing of Hiroshima. It only takes a few unbalanced, hate-filled people to unsettle a peaceful protest and start a riot, as we saw in Minneapolis. But if you practice the peace within you, you attract others. Remain calm in a crowd, and you may get a movement. The more we are settled in ourselves, the stronger the movement toward justice and truth.

Can we possibly trust that? Can we possibly practice it? Only if we respond to atrocities first with prayer and reflection. When we admit to God our fear, our doubt, our inclination either to hide or to hit back when we feel hurt or threatened, then we can settle into that place of inner calm and unity. Then we can live and act in love. We can unleash that spiritual explosion. But we can't do it on our own; it only happens by exposing ourselves to God at a deep level. The dance of God in our hearts is a dance of abundance. Jesus absorbed the tragic knowledge of that dance of death that killed his cousin and colleague. He let God transform that pain to good within him, a goodness that flowed out in a flood of compassion, a wealth of healing, a banquet that went on and on. A dance of abundance. A dance of love. It is yours to claim, yours to use, if

you will accept it. So aren't you glad you're here? Aren't you glad to be living in interesting times? Amen. Thanks be to God.

Indebtedness: I was deeply moved this week by Richard Rohr's daily devotional emphasizing nonviolence as taught and practiced by Gandhi, Fr. John Dear, Thich Nhat Hahn, Wangari Maathai, and Dr. King. This week, I also learned a great deal about Rep. John Lewis that I hadn't known before; my sister Wendy sent me the transcript of his last words. And I note, as I write, a Washington Post headline: "Calm returns to Portland as federal agents withdraw." Case in point.

Prayers

God of abundance, when we are leveled by the sheer volume of distress in the world, help us find a way within, where you wait for us with a banquet of peace, ready for us to eat and be filled, ready for us to share. When we are perplexed, and feel lost and aimless, troubled and unmoored, show us what best to do, what next to do, and what to do at all.

God of mercy, help us to separate monstrous deeds from those who do them; there are no monsters that your mercy cannot tame. Help us to see people as people, and to bring out the best in them by revealing what you have shown us: the best in ourselves.

God of grace and comfort, be with your children who suffer: all those in refugee camps far from familiar homes; all those in war zones; all those on covid units, whether recovering or dying, working or cleaning. Help our leaders find a way to support those whose relief payments have ended or who face eviction. May your peace reign in our hearts, and your wisdom in our deeds.

...In your name we pray, AMEN