

+++ In the Name of Jesus +++

Date: Sunday, August 2, 2026 (10th Sunday after Pentecost, series A) (Proper 13)

Title: “We Can’t... But He Can”

Text: Matthew 14:16-17

¹³When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed Him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed those who were ill.

¹⁵As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said, ‘This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.’

¹⁶Jesus replied, ‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.’

¹⁷‘We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,’ they answered. [...]

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The reason I interrupted our Gospel reading at precisely this point is because this is the very heart of the problem this reading exposes—namely, the *isolation* that breaks us down and makes it almost impossible for us to see anything beyond our own immediate situation... our own self... our own problems.

Those were the things these disciples here in this reading were struggling with—a narrow and constricted focus on all their own problems. It was **“a remote place”** where this reading took place, far from town. (Matt 14:13) It was late in the day—the shadow time. (15) They had no food, really, to speak of. (17) And on top of all that, they were suffering from the mental and emotional devastation of knowing *why* they were out there, far from town, without any provisions—and that is, the terrible tragedy that’s concealed from *you and me* behind the opening phrase at the start of this reading. **“When Jesus heard *what had happened*,”** Matthew says, **“he withdrew, by boat, privately, to a solitary place.”** (13a)

What had happened, you see, was the execution of John the Baptist. John had been in prison for a long time already since telling Herod Antipas (the ruler of this part of Palestine) that he, Herod, had been sinning by having a sexual relationship with his sister-in-law. Recently, matters had come to a head when that sister-in-law’s daughter had **“pleased the king”** so much with her dancing at his birthday party that he had promised (on a whim) to give her anything she wanted. (14:7) Turns out, what she wanted was what her mother told her to ask for: **“the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”** (14:8) So, word was sent... John was decapitated... his head was delivered... his disciples claimed his body and buried it... and, finally, word was sent to Jesus (and his disciples) that John (his cousin, their friend) was dead. (14:10-12)

Imagine, then, how lonely all of these guys felt in their grief, shock, and sorrow. **“When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew, by boat, privately, to a solitary place... [and] as evening approached, his disciples came to him.”** (13, 15) Even *there*—surrounded by all those other people Matthew tells us had *followed* Jesus, on foot, from neighbouring towns, hoping to hear him speak (and maybe, just maybe, perform some healing miracles too)—right in the middle of what Matthew describes as **“a large crowd,”** Jesus and The Twelve were emotionally and spiritually *alone*. (14)

Many of us know what that feels like too. We too have buried cousins and friends—not to mention parents, siblings, spouses, or even children of our own. If any of those losses have

been *yours*, you know better than many people do, the intense torment such losses bring. I remember reading somewhere that losing a loved one feels like “having your heart cut out of your body without anesthetic.” I suppose that’s a bit of an exaggeration, but what that image is trying to get at is the *roaring* of that pain, which becomes so loud that it drowns everything else out. When we suffer that kind of a loss, *nothing else matters!* Whatever we eat, drink, wear, say, or do, makes no difference—almost as if we’re perched way up there in the corner of the room, watching an actor who *looks* like us but is clearly *not* us, because nothing *they* are saying or doing really affects us. WE are the only thing that matters: OUR grief, OUR pain, OUR loss. Everything else recedes like the tide going out at Rath Trevor—*whoosh!*—leaving us high and dry, and cut off from everybody else.

Not *all* of our isolation is *always* that bad, of course! Many of us here in this area *voluntarily* took on a certain sort of “*relative* isolation” when we moved here. We didn’t know a single person; we didn’t have anybody right here on the ground to help us. Yet all sorts of good things started to happen to us anyway, maybe even partly *because* we were so completely cut-off from everyone and everything that was familiar. We met *strangers* who quickly became friends!—here at church and in the wider community—neighbours, dog-walkers, hikers, swimmers, pickleballers, golfers, cashiers... you name it! It hasn’t always been easy, of course, even so. We have still had *plenty* of adjustments to make, and attachments to form, and routines to re-invent. But stepping outside what had been our previous (and well-established) set of relationships, so that we *had* to learn to make it “on our own” in a new (and probably very different) environment, has been a tremendously rewarding experience (for many of us).

Not all isolation, though, is that benign—or works out that well. Some people really do struggle to be “on their own.” As I mentioned earlier, the death of a close family member throws many people’s lives into chaos. Everything changes, “just like that.” For that matter, even *missing* your spouse while they’re away for a while can be hard, especially if something challenging happens while they’re gone. Remember what God said about our first ancestors, back in the book of Genesis? “**It is not good for a person to be alone.**” (Gen 2:18) All these centuries later, that’s still true. Loneliness, in and of itself, tends to make us even more vulnerable than we already are, to temptation and sin... unbelief and despair.

That, I think, is what these disciples were wrestling with, in this opening half of today’s Gospel reading. Their physical, emotional, and maybe even spiritual loneliness blinded them to everything beyond their immediate problem—and that was, the emptiness of their lunch-buckets.

- Far away from Save-On and Thrifty Foods, they were hungry!
- Far away from their homes and families, they were lonely!
- The day had been long and difficult, and now it was late!
- Their grief at the death of John was consuming them.

On top of all those other problems, I wonder if they were also maybe feeling a little bit afraid of that “**large crowd**” that had been gathering all around them over the course of the day. (13-14) Hungry people, on their own, without resources, were just as much of a potential threat in those days as they are today. “**YOU give them something to eat,**” Jesus told his disciples: but all THEY could say was, “**Who, us? All we have are 5 loaves and 2 fish!**” (17) *Lord Jesus, don’t you see what we’re facing here?—how low we’ve sunk?—how hard-pressed we are? Five loaves and two fish!—that’s ALL we have! Beyond that, we’ve got nothing.*

As Jesus's modern-day disciples, many of us have "been there, and done that"—if not literally, then spiritually. All we have (in our isolation from others) is our emptiness and loneliness. All we have (in our isolation from God) is our sin and guilt (and the prospect of our own death). We are not just facing a lonely hour, day, season, or year, but a lonely *eternity*—cut-off and separated from God's love by our chronic and inward-curving focus on ourselves. **"God"**—we are *convinced* we're going to have to tell him, one day (blending Paul's words from Romans chapter 7, into this reading)—**"God, I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. All I have are 5 loaves and 2 fishes, MAX! You command me to love *you* with my whole heart, and to love *my neighbour* as myself: but I honestly have to admit that the only thing I really focus on (most of the time) is *myself*!"**

That is the devastating truth that destroys our hope the most of all—like being told (the way these disciples were, here in this reading) that *they* somehow had to feed those 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. How can any of us do what is so obviously beyond ourselves?

Well, we can't. And that's why it's such a good thing that this reading doesn't *end* right here, at this point, half-way in. I *do* think it's good for us to *pause* here for a while so we can *recognize* and *acknowledge* the loneliness and self-centredness that all of us disciples feel when we are "off on our own." But the last thing I want is for us to *get stuck* there, as if this is the end of the story! No—thank God, this story *continues*—both *that* (original) story and *our* story too (every time we feel "cut off" from God, and from others). For the Twelve *and* for us, there IS hope—and a better ending, right around the corner—every time *Jesus* sees what's going on, and steps right into our need.

"Bring them here to me," Jesus said, in the very first part of the *next* part of this story. **"Bring ME those 5 loaves and 2 fish that you think are so small and useless. I can do wonders with them, for you. I can bless both you and others through them."** And as we will hear in just a minute, that's exactly what Jesus did. He fed both his disciples and that large crowd *well*, out of *the scraps of nothing* that they brought him. **"They all ate and were satisfied,"** Matthew tells us, **"and the disciples picked up 12 basketsful of broken pieces that were left over."** (20) Their "nothing" became a surplus, because of Jesus!

Our lives can be like that, too—because of Jesus. The lives that we set down before him are *crumbs*, really—lives that are full of *emptiness* (if that makes sense); lives that are crowded with *loneliness*. Like those first disciples, we too find that situation to be paralyzing, disabling, and devastating. But *even so!*... Jesus *fills* our lives, too, with abundance and blessing!

- He takes away the guilt of our sin, and fills us (all the way up to the brim) with forgiveness. He did that again at the start of this service, when we heard his own words of Absolution, and we are going to be receiving his forgiveness all over again next Sunday when he multiplies his body and blood for us in Holy Communion.
- Jesus takes away our loneliness, and brings us into community—making every single one of us a member of "the ONE holy Christian and apostolic church," here on earth and in heaven.
- Jesus takes all of the emptiness we struggle with—and turns it into a new and compelling reason to *live*—not for ourselves, but to bring him glory and to serve his mission.

In other words, Jesus takes US—

- people who Jeremiah calls "**blemished pottery**" (18:1-11),

- and Isaiah calls “**people of unclean lips**” (6:5),
- and Peter acknowledges as “**sinful**” (Luke 5:8),
- and Paul recognizes as “**always falling short of the glory of God**” (Romans 3:23)—

Jesus takes US “poor miserable sinners” and *changes* us into what Paul calls “**a new creation**” (2 Cor 5:17), and what Peter describes as “**a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.**” The *reason* Jesus our Saviour does that is (in Peter’s words) “**so that WE may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.**” (1 Peter 2:9)

That, you see, is our Saviour’s specialty—the one thing, above all others, that he loves the most. The same way that Jesus himself had the life drained right out of him on the cross, and was laid (limp and cold) in the grave, *but STILL* was raised from the dead... and *appeared* to his disciples... and was *taken up* into heaven... and is *seated* with God in the highest place—in that same way exactly, you and I too are rescued God, *because of* Jesus, from all emptiness, and defeat, and despair—with *basketsful* of God’s grace left over!

Some of you have probably heard of that video series called *The Chosen*. It’s the biggest film production based on the life of Jesus, that’s ever been made. As soon as its director (Dallas Jenkins) came up with the idea for that series, he turned to a very interesting financial model that had never been used before, for a project like that. *Crowd-funding*. What he did, in other words, was gather together *lots and lots* of *small and insignificant-seeming* contributions, and turn them into something terrific. And do you know the name Jenkins chose for this brand-company he was going to use to do that? He called it “**5&2 Studios.**”

Five loaves and two fishes—that’s all that any of us have. But that’s all that Jesus needs. From our perspective, “five loaves of bread and two fish” are *never* enough. But from our Saviour’s perspective, they’re *more* than enough.

Thanks be to God. Amen!

[And now, as promised, here is the second half of our Gospel reading--]

¹⁸ ‘Bring them here to Me,’ Jesus said. ¹⁹ And He told the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketsful of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.