

Theme: "Party Time"

Matthew 14:13-21

(A) 10 Pentecost

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I love a good party. In fact, I always thought it would be fun to have a career as a 'party planner'. You know, the one who uses someone else's money to find the finest foods, best entertainment and make sure all the guests have had their fill - and maybe have a few leftovers. And even though a career as a party planner never materialized, I still like a good party. However, I distinctly remember one party our family hosted, where scarcity drove every decision and as a consequence, tension, anxiety and self-absorption became the main course.

The party I'm alluding to feels a bit like the gospel story today...where the disciples have their doubts about meeting the needs of (5,000 people - plus women and children) who had gathered to hear Jesus. You see...I, too, had my doubts about providing for a family who had visited our church a handful of times over the course of several months. I had come to know a bit of their story and in light of this, I realized they had nowhere to go for Easter dinner. They were in temporary housing. They had very little money. Their extended family had severed ties with them a while back. And so... I extended the invitation to them to spend Easter with our family. This sounds like a noble gesture but truthfully, we too, were struggling to make ends meet.

In fact, it made no sense at all to extend an invitation for which I had no idea how it would materialize. I had no idea where the money would come from to buy the food - and not just food...but providing a banquet of the finest foods. But nonetheless, party plans were set in motion and I pretended to proceed with wild abandon to provide a meal that would have received accolades from the greatest food critics in the nation! Compassion... and hospitality for the less fortunate... was the name of the game. And I was up to the task - until I was not. Until fear set in - fear of not having enough of what it took to put on a lavish party.

In our gospel lesson today, we find Jesus in a state of grief and lament. His dear friend, John the Baptist had just been killed and his head served up on a platter during the party of King Herod. A party characterized by great wealth and luxuriousness; a party

hosted by a tyrant concerned for his own power and well being; a party full of hatred...and death.

And this is where our gospel reading begins today with Jesus reeling from grief and loss and longing to be alone. But if you know anything about Jesus, he tends to be a magnet for crowds... and not always at convenient times for him. What is striking here however, is that Jesus sets aside his own pain and loss and responds to the crowds with compassion. He comes in response to the people's suffering - even in the midst of his own. This...in my opinion, would not have been the best time to put on a dinner party. At least, it wasn't for me. And maybe not for the disciples, either.

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 to them, "They need not go away; **you** give them something to eat."* ***YOU**, give them something to eat.*

The emphasis on the word, "you" is emphatic in the Greek. "**You**, give them something to eat," Jesus says. You see, the disciples role in this story is vital to how the story unfolds. And we... are vital to how the bigger story of Jesus unfolds. I have to wonder, if the story of the feeding of five thousand plus is about more than food. Afterall, this story is found in all four gospels and I get the sense the story sums up...discipleship. An invitation to action and involvement.

But in all honesty, I get what the disciples are hinting at. It's late. The sun is going down, the people are hungry, they're out in the middle of nowhere and quite frankly, if I had been following Jesus all day, I too, would have said, "It's time to go home, Jesus." And the disciples knew from past experience that hungry mobs can create quite a stir. And fear, you see, can drive decisions which are *not* rooted in love and compassion. So the response of the disciples, "We're done here, Jesus. The people can take care of themselves and get something to eat on their own dime," was not rooted in love that drew the crowd together in the first place.

You see, what the disciples didn't realize or maybe had forgotten due to their growling stomachs was... the people in the crowd could not just go and get dinner at the local diner. The compassion Jesus had for the people far exceeded their food supply, it had to do with to do with the overall picture of the Roman empire exploiting the poor and ordering their world according to their whims. The rich and powerful were not known for siding with the oppressed, the ordinary, the downtrodden, or the hungry. And **that** is what drives Jesus' compassion. That's what makes the invitation to Jesus' dinner party different than all the others. But it is the next line in the gospel reading today that really, really hits home for me, and perhaps you, too.

¹⁷*They (the disciples) replied to Jesus, "We have **nothing here** but five loaves and two fish."* We only have a little bit - surely not enough to feed the multitude! The disciples acted out of what they didn't have, not what was already before them. The disciples added five plus two and got seven. They needed to learn to count to eight. They needed to learn that Jesus' math doesn't match the status quo. They needed to learn that the promise of provision is their future - as uncertain as it may have seemed. The disciples had forgotten *who* was hosting the party. Perhaps we, too, need to count beyond the obvious. Beyond the *what we don't have to what God can provide*. And trust me, it's not easy to envision throwing a party when living into our scarcity - and that is not just where feeding the hungry is concerned.

And I feel that today, I am operating out of scarcity, too as we are just six weeks from our fall programming and in need of a lot more people to lead children on Sunday mornings, participate in Wednesday night dinners, service projects such as Supper House and God's Work our Hands. I am looking at what I don't have. However, as I stand here today...I am reminded of what we do have. You. All of you coming to experience the abundance of God's love and grace through a life of service.

The prophet Isaiah today invites the people of Israel to live an abundant life...even if they don't have it all together. "Come, all who are thirsty - come to the water!" (Eugene Peterson in Message Bible) says, "Come to the water even if you are

penniless. Come anyway. Come out of your scarcity and live into the life-giving, life-nourishing words and be reminded of the covenant commitment God made with you - a sure, enduring love where nothing is required to come, but thirst. Our lives do not have to be neat and tidy. And the the call to discipleship lives within this promise but is rarely tidy or convenient. But needless to say, the call, the invitation, needs our RSVP - even in the midst of our own shortsightedness.

Oh, I forgot to finish my dinner story, didn't I? Our guests came to dinner. And yes, we had enough food. However... I was so consumed with concern that there would not be enough food and that the presentation of the food would not look good if it didn't have all the expensive garnishes that while in all the hustle and bustle of shouting orders to my family, that when the doorbell rang, I was not there to answer to it. I was not there to answer it or greet our guests... You see, in my hurriedness and worriedness, I cut my finger deep enough to need stitches. But the party went on without me and guess what? We even had leftovers! And the joy of fellowship!

The gospel story today is often called "a miracle" but the miracle isn't about where all the food came from or "how" it all happened. The writer never alludes to that. The miracle, you see, is in the meal of bread and wine. It is in the table that is set for everyone, and *not* prepared out of scarcity, but out of abundance.

And I believe...with all my heart, that something happens in the space between the death and the resurrection. Something happens between the invitation and the meal itself. You see, the party that Matthew's Jesus is inviting us to begins with compassion and the well-being of others. *That* is the meal that sustains life. The life of others...and ourselves.

Yup. It's party time. And trust me, the food is good. The company is simply amazing. So... won't you join me... in inviting the crowd to the table? Amen.