

One Fainting Robin

Isaiah 55:1-5 | Romans 9:1-5 | Psalm 145:8-9, 15-22 | Matthew 14:13-21

MATTHEW 14:13-21

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.

INTRODUCTION

[I recently realized that between the COVID-19 pandemic and the systemic racism epidemic in places like home and the general state of the world, I haven't had many jokes in my preaching lately. So, consider yourself warned, there might be a joke or two.]

My wife is scandalized by the idea that I would like such pedestrian literature as the Harry Potter series. But I do. I like the great stories of mythology and literature as well—after which it is modelled, but I enjoy this series. And I've been thinking about the last chapter of the sixth book—*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*—this week. The chapter is called "The White Tomb" and much of it takes place at the funeral of Dumbledore.¹ Harry is there, at the funeral of his mentor and guide, feeling sad and detached. And yet he's also thinking about the road in front of him, the threats of Voldemort (the villain of the series) against him and his friends, the likeliness that it will cost him his own life, the necessity of distancing himself from his friends, and yet the resolve to continue on this path of defeating this enemy for the good of the wizarding world. It's an astonishing scene. And it's not uncommon in literature—the hero suffers a tragic loss, and yet somehow is all the more determined to act selflessly, to care for others when there is no discernible advantage. Loss to compassion to selflessness. It's a meaningful trajectory, and, I will suggest to you, the shape of our Gospel reading today.

1. LOSS

Our passage began: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."² Heard what? It's striking that whatever it is he heard, he immediately withdrew. We look up a little and we see: John the Baptist has been executed. Jesus's second cousin, the man who had baptized him, the one that the Gospels call the forerunner, the one who prepared the way for Jesus—he's been killed. And his disciples, after burying the body, come to notify Jesus. It's no wonder that Jesus wants a little solitude, to go across the sea to an empty place and wander in prayer and his own thoughts. Indeed, I think Jesus was almost certainly reflecting on not only his loss, but what lays in front of him. In the few verses

¹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter: The Complete Collection* (Pottermore Publishing, 2005), 2776-2791.

² Matt 14:13.

following our passage, Jesus will return to his solitude. And this is the only time in Matthew's Gospel, in the three years between the temptation in the wilderness and the garden of Gethsemane, that Jesus manages to be truly alone. It's a suggestive moment—that John who prepares the way not only in proclaiming the kingdom, but dying unjustly for it, turns Jesus's mind to his own coming death. It is the contemplation of what has been lost and what is still yet to be lost. But in our passage, that moment of solitude is a brief moment. The crowds come crashing into his space. They come on foot from the towns, preventing Jesus from having his moment of contemplation. And unlike me, when I am sitting in my living room, quietly pondering the deeper things and writing a sermon full of profound, life-changing treasures as I always do (*that's a joke, you're supposed to laugh*), and the dog comes a-barking, Jesus, on the contrary, does not erupt in frustration at the distraction. In this moment of sad solitude met with disruption, Jesus's heart turns to compassion.

2. COMPASSION

"When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."³ Notice what he does first. We call this the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes—and it is that. But Jesus's compassion first moves him to heal the sick. Like a good doctor at the end of a long shift and losing a treasured friend, Jesus picks up his sacred stethoscope and divine prescription pad and pulls a double shift. His loss becomes love, and his love becomes miracles of healing. But it doesn't even stop with that. It comes time to send these people home to get some dinner—which is what the always helpful disciples have in mind—but Jesus's compassion extends to feeding them as well. And this is no small catering job. We see in the last verse that there were 5,000 men plus women and children. Let's assume for a moment that there's roughly the same number of women as men—this is conservative because at that place and time in history, it's more likely that men would be at work or, you know, dead. Let's assume an average of 2-3 kids per family. We're talking about a crowd of probably more than 25,000 people—more than even 100 Peter Klingenberg's could handle. By comparison, the largest venue in Vienna is the *Wiener Stadthalle*, which seats just over 16,000 people. We're talking about one and a half to two times that many. (*And yes, I am measuring in Wiener Stadthalle units because, as an American, I will measure in anything except metric.*) The point is this, it's a large crowd. And after some sad news and a long day of healing, Jesus decided to feed them. I don't know how much energy it takes the Son of God to feed multitudes, but I do know it takes patience. It takes love. It takes the sincerest form of compassion.

3. SELFLESSNESS

But is this story just about Jesus's compassion that day? I would suggest there is a significant theological theme emerging here as well, because Jesus doesn't just multiply fish and loaves. He takes the bread, looks up to heaven, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the people. This combination of things, this series of actions, happens only three times in Matthew's Gospel. It happens here, the second miraculous feeding like this one in the next chapter, and then finally at last supper.⁴ And it's this last one to which the miracles point. As I said earlier, I think Jesus was hoping for some solitude that he may think not only about John's death, but his own death yet to come. And in enacting this moment while feeding crowds, Jesus points us to that meal which commemorates his death and resurrection, his ultimate act of compassion. You

³ Matt 14:14.

⁴ See Matt 15:32-39 and 26:17-30.

see, Jesus was moving forward from here, tired and sad to be sure, but undeterred from his mission to save his people. And in holding that bread, he pointed those present to something that they would not understand until later—his selfless sacrifice, his saving compassion.

4. FEEDING THE HUNGRY

And this should not be lost on us. We are the hungry. We are like Israel in the wilderness, waiting on manna from heaven.⁵ We are like school of Elisha in famine-ridden Gilgal, waiting for miraculous bread.⁶ We are like the crowd that day, hungry and sick and desperately in need of our Lord's compassion. But it is not fish and loaves that we need. Rather, it is the compassion he anticipated in that last supper. It is his saving death and resurrection that we need—for we, too, are helpless in our sin against the Lord and against each other. Thanks be to God for this gospel. But, having been saved, we must also follow the example of our Lord. And this, friends, is a time for compassion. People are cooped up and feeling restricted—even wanting their solitude. But tension is high. Compassion is needed. Some people feel the pandemic restrictions are too strict and we need to be free to live. Others are truly fearful of this disease which seems so untameable. Tensions will rise. Compassion is needed. We live in a society that, perhaps not as intensely as other places, still bears the marks of systemic injustice to particular peoples. Tension is here. Compassion is needed. Too many people in our city and country and world live without adequate provision. Tension is there too. Compassion is needed. Our sin slowly rots our lives and poisons our relationships. Tension is always with us. Compassion is needed. Look around you. There are people who should be enjoying their retirement somewhere tropical, who remain, who give of themselves selflessly to run the church shop. There are people in this church who work long hours and deserve a break, who still find the strength to show up at the soup kitchen. Good examples abound. What about you? What about me? Having been shown compassion from our Lord, will I show compassion to others, others that I disagree with, that annoy me, that are simply in need?

CONCLUSION

As I conclude, I want to share words from a poet who also knew solitude, Emily Dickinson:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.⁷

Not one, but thousands had their aches eased that day. And billions on the day of the cross. May we live that our Lord hath not lived in vain.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, may we follow your Son in the compassion he has shown us, that many may come to you in faith. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁵ Exodus 16:1-36.

⁶ See 2 Kings 4:42-44.

⁷ Emily Dickinson, *Hope Is the Thing With Feathers: The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Layton: G. Smith, 2019), 10.