

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Matthew 14:13-21

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. (Matthew 14:13, RSV)

“When he heard this.” Heard what? Heard the appalling news about John the Baptist, how that man had been beheaded because of an old fool’s delight in a dancing girl.

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew...” He withdrew. Yet the backbone of Jesus was curved before no man. Why then did he withdraw? Because it is his strange way, his holy way, of being the Messiah.

ANE/CHO/RE~ /SEN

The Greek word for “withdraw” or “depart” is *anechoresen*. This word is used repeatedly in St. Matthew’s Gospel, as if it is a favorite word. In each case, it looks as if someone is withdrawing from the field of battle, perhaps because of overwhelming force on the other side. But in each case, the story of Jesus continues. Our God is will able to bring forth good even in face of trouble and danger. Let me run through these cases quickly.¹ We begin with the Wise Men of the Epiphany story:

And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, [the wise men] *departed* to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:12, RSV)

A couple verses later, we hear that Joseph, the protector of the Holy Family, also withdraws when he is warned in a dream about the murderous intentions of King Herod:

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and *departed* to Egypt, (Matthew 2:14, RSV)

Likewise later, when King Herod dies, Joseph fears to return his family to Judea because Herod’s son Archelaus ruled there, and so he withdraws to Galilee:

¹ These references were nicely assembled by Roger E. Van Harn in *The Lectionary Commentary on The Gospels* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapid, MI, 2005), pages 82-83.

But when [Joseph] heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he *withdrew* to the district of Galilee. (Matthew 2:22, RSV)

That is why Jesus grew up in Galilee. He was born in Bethlehem of Judea, but raised in Galilee.

Later, we come to a passage similar to today's passage. It is about the withdrawal of Jesus when he hears about John the Baptist. John had been preaching in the wilderness of Judea. That was where Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan River and then led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and was tempted by the Devil. Right after the story of his temptations, we hear that Jesus withdrew from that Judean wilderness back to Galilee:

Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he *departed* into Galilee; (Matthew 4:12, KJV)

Then, in Chapter 12, we read of the plot of the Pharisees to destroy Jesus. Our Lord responds to this news by withdrawing:

¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him. ¹⁵Jesus, aware of this, *withdrew* from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all, (Matthew 12:14-15, RSV)

This particular passage shares a feature with this evening's passage. It tells what Jesus then did after withdrawing: he healed folks:

And many followed him, and he healed them all, (Matthew 12:14-15, RSV)

Likewise in today's reading, when Jesus hears that John has been beheaded, he withdraws, with the result that he heals people and, in this case, feeds them with the miracle of the loaves and fishes:

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:13-14, RSV)

THE EVILDOER'S CHEAP INJURY

There is a kind of tyranny the evildoer can exercise over us, even if he cannot immediately lay his hands on us: he can bully us by disrupting our path in life.

Even if he cannot lay his hands upon us, he can touch our souls, if we let him. Where before there had been peace and focus upon a path, now there is burning within the heart a desire for revenge, an imagination filled with dreams of the downfall of the enemy. Where before we had said our goodnight prayer and drifted off to sleep, now we lay awake rehearsing the wrongdoing of our enemy and wishing for his comeuppance. It is a cheap kind of victory for the evildoer. He does not even need to rouse himself to come after us. Our own restless mind does the damage, deforming our souls.

But none of that for Jesus. He hears of the horrible death of his kinsman, John, and he withdraws. But he does not withdrawal in order to brood. Soon we find him in a lonely place apart, spending the night in prayer. (Matthew 14:23) But before that, we find him ministering to the multitudes who have sought him out, healing their sick, and feeding them.

Should we be surprised at how unchanged Jesus seems in face of the evildoer Herod, who beheaded John? No, Jesus had spoken of these things earlier, in his Sermon on the Mount:

³⁸Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: ³⁹But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:38-39, KJV)

In St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, we find a lovely statement of the principle at work in Jesus:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21, RSV)

That is what Jesus does. Herod has done evil by executing that good man John the Baptist. But Jesus does not let that evil disrupt his soul or distract his ministry. For the chief thing for Jesus is not revenge, but simply that he follow the will of his heavenly Father. He puts his principle this way:

I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! (Luke 12:50, RSV)

For him, there is no life, no nourishment in this world, apart from the will of his heavenly Father:

³⁴Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.

COURAGE

Now, this story of our Lord's steady walk in his own path invites us consider two subjects: courage and prayer. John the Baptist has been beheaded. It would be enough to cause anyone to shudder. But shudder or no, Jesus continues his ministry. How could he do it? These two answers come to mind: Jesus was brave, and Jesus was a man of prayer. Let's take them one after another. First, courage.

Consider the story of Gethsemane. This is a story I cherish because it gives us a glimpse into the subjectivity of Jesus. In this story, we learn not only what Jesus *did* but also how he *felt*. The story gives us a window into the soul of Jesus, and there we find him troubled. Indeed, he seems heartsick and frightened at the cross soon bearing down on him:

⁴⁰And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation. ⁴¹And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, ⁴²Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. ⁴³And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. ⁴⁴And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:40-44, KJV)

As if was in Gethsemane, so it is in today's Gospel story: there is reason aplenty for Jesus to be frightened, yet it is the nature of true courage that even if one feels fear, he does not let that fear do him harm, do her harm. The beheading of John the Baptist might indeed have frightened Jesus, but he shows his courage in that whether he is frightened or not, he continues with his ministry. He does not permit the fear to do to him what would be the deepest of harms: to cause him to flee from his mission.

Such courage is part of a full human life -- not just for Jesus, but also for you and me too. Sometimes it comes our way that we have a sense of what would be the right thing for us to do. Our responsibilities as professionals or as parents or as law-abiding citizens require us to take a certain step. Yet our heart pounds with fear at that step. For us, it feels that we are putting our world at risk to take such a step. These things take individual judgment. It is hard for anyone but we ourselves to make the final decision. But at least this much can be said: courage asks us to pursue the good, even if our hearts are pounding with fear all along the way.

PRAYER

So, that is one point: Jesus was a brave man. The second point is related to it: Jesus was a man of prayer.

Today's story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is a kind of pause in the momentum of the story. The story starts off with the news of the death of John the Baptist. Then we read that upon hearing this news, Jesus "withdrew from there in

a boat to a lonely place apart.”(Matthew 14:13) Then we have the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. But this story rather serves as an interruption to what Jesus had wanted. He wanted to pray. And so, as soon as he can, Jesus dismisses the crowds and his disciples and turns to prayer. Again, we hear of the lonely place apart:

²²And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away.
²³And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. (Matthew 14:22-23, KJV)

What I want to suggest is that our Lord’s life of prayer is related to his life of courage. He was brave because he prayed. He was calm in face of all the horror and hurly-burly of Herod’s beheading of John the Baptist because he was preoccupied with an even more important matter than that: he was preoccupied with his heavenly Father in prayer.

Recently I attended a theology conference down at Loyola College, Baltimore, Maryland. A dramatic thing happened during one of the question-and-answer sessions. The lecture had been about “Pastoral Care in the Name of Jesus.” At the end of the lecture, an elegant lady stood up to ask a question. She asked the question, sat down, and burst into tears. Her question had been about a great apostolic promise -- a promise that means much to you and me too. It is a promise from St. Paul in First Corinthians:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, RSV)

When the questioner burst into tears, the lecturer paused, gathered herself together, and answered as best she could. She said that experience had taught her that sometimes we human beings can become so very down-hearted that we can hardly think straight anymore. We can become so depressed that can no longer care about the things that normally we would care about. Then, she said, it is important that we should be people of prayer, so that even when we can no longer find words for our prayers, nonetheless the habit of prayer and the words of the Psalms or the saints will help carry us along and give us strength when it feels that all of our own strength is gone.

It is no insignificant detail, then, when we read in today’s Gospel story about Jesus hearing the news about the death of John the Baptist and then withdrawing to “a lonely place apart.” It was part of the rhythm of our Lord’s life. He was a man of prayer. And therefore he was a man of courage.

YOU AND ME

As for you and me who bear the name of Christ, I think we should follow his example as best we can. Let us then flee the evildoer if we must. But above even that, let us flee sin and the deforming our souls. In this way, we will be sticking close by the side of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.