

Pentecost XII (Sermon Proper 13 A)

St. John's Episcopal Church

Jamaica Plain, MA

August 3, 2008

Let's imagine that today's gospel is a made-for-TV movie. Who's in the cast and what's the plot? First the cast. We have Jesus. He's just learned that his cousin, John, who spoke God's word fiercely and courageously has been murdered by Herod, the political boss in the area. John had already been thrown into jail. He could have rotted there till Herod died, out of the way, silenced effectively. Instead, Herod murdered John to save face for a promise Herod made while he was drunk. Jesus has gone off alone to grieve his cousin's death, and to consider the direction of his own life. If Jesus continues to challenge the powers that be, both religious and political, he's going to end up just like John- murdered. And today he knows it in his bones. Solitude, silence, countryside, that's what he needs.

The rest of the cast: the disciples, who follow along even though Jesus probably did not invite them. But as Peter so eloquently said another time: "To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." So, they trooped along. And then the crowds, hungry for his word, hungry for his healing, hungry for his message. They gathered up family members, things they'd need for the day, and followed him, across fields, over the hills, up rocky grades, whatever. Just following Jesus to get something to fill their hunger.

So now the plot. Tension right away, can't you feel it? The audience wants to know what Jesus, who wanted to be alone, is going to do with all these people: the disciples and a crowd of thousands. Is he tempted to say: "This is my time, now. Come back next Wednesday when I'm feeling better." or more directly: "Go away now. Give me some space. Let me set the pace here. No more healings today. Just let me be for one full day." But that's not what the gospels say. They say that Jesus had compassion on the crowds.

We are his, aren't we? This Jesus who had compassion on the crowds. We are his, aren't we? We don't do ministry when it's convenient. We don't turn people away so that we can preserve our prayer time. We don't put anything before compassion. We don't reach out to others when things are settled in other areas of our lives, when we've got our own feelings under control, when our life is less stressed, when work feels more manageable. We don't have safe places where the demands of the gospel cannot enter, where the demands of our baptismal promises have to wait their turn. For those who follow Jesus there is only NOW and **these people** and **this place**. And here we are in the thick of it, because we are his.

And the disciples. Tagging along. If they had any sense they'd be scared by John's murder, too. Many of them knew John, some had been his followers. And here he is dead. They're connected to Jesus now who's just as uppity to the powers-that-be as John ever was. What's that going to mean for them? And it wasn't only Jesus who grieved for John. The disciples who knew him, who admired his courage, had lost a companion, as well. Maybe a little solitude, some

time alone with Jesus would assuage their grief and their fear. But no, here are crowds of people, throngs following along. Will they never stop? Will they never go away? When is it just our time? And then the crowds got hungry. Now what? How can we be expected to deal with their hunger? If you want a definition of an impossible task, this would be it, feeding 5 thousand men and their families in the wilderness. We can't do this. It's impossible. It's too much to ask of us. We don't have the resources. We're tired and hungry ourselves. Enough already. Don't ask so much from us. We're not up to it.

And then the crowds. What made them follow Jesus to this remote spot? What made them sit there on the grass as hunger began to creep up on them? First a mild headache, then a grumbling stomach, then the children crying or getting irritable. Then real hunger and the stark reality that they were a long way from home. It could be hours, even if they left now, to get home and get food. This man's words and his healings were so powerful, but we're getting desperate here. What are we going to do with the whole family hungry now?

Real need. Real hunger. Thousands of people. Jesus having planned a day very different from the one he got. The disciples feeling the needs of the crowd, surely, but not up to the task, defeated before they even started. What could they do with so many? So they went to Jesus. He asked what they **did** have. Not much worth mentioning, they thought. But they mentioned it anyway. A few fish, a little bread. Jesus tells them to bring what they have to him. And the rest of the plot we know. Thousands fed, and satisfied, and

filled to overflowing and baskets of leftovers. Abundance and nourishment for thousands from what little the disciples could muster.

Everyone had a day they didn't expect. Everyone learned something that day. Something about God, who feeds in wilderness places, on journeys, when we're at the end of our resources, when things look most bleak. Something about justice, using what we have, however small, to meet a need, however big. Something about worship, taking bread and giving thanks and breaking bread and eating as one, gathered around Jesus Christ. Something about ministry. Turning with compassion to those who require our attention, whether they are expected or unexpected, welcome or not. Doing **now** what is asked of us now, not because we are strong or brave or confident but because we are Christ's and Christ is God's.

A good movie, as it turns out. And the good news is it's **our** movie, it's our story, our life. May God be praised! Amen.