

Sermon (8/6/17, Matthew 14: 1-21):

Chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel tells the tale of two banquets. The first banquet is hosted by Herod. Herod was a powerful ruler and he's throwing a birthday bash for himself. For Herod, it was a banquet initiated by himself, on behalf of himself, and in celebration of himself. Perhaps Herod was never given a birthday party when he was a kid and always felt like he missed out on something. Or maybe he always wanted a birthday party like the other kids had at Chucky Cheese, or McDonalds, or even in his back yard. Whatever it was, Herod figured it was high time for a birthday bash of his own. So, he invited his most influential friends and he called in the best of the local caterers. There would be magicians and musicians. The food would be gourmet. The finest of wines would be served, enough to even loosen up those uptight political types. There would be toasts to Herod, declaring how great and wonderful he is. There would be laughter, and dancing, and surprises, including a very special one by his own step-daughter. This was going to be some party!

As the story goes, it seems the highlight was when Herod's step-daughter surprises him with a dance. Taken up in the moment, and the wine, Herod makes her an offer.

'Ask of me anything. Even half my kingdom,' he says with a chuckle, 'Ask me and it's yours!'

Now, I'm sure Herod never expected much to come of that. I mean, what would a teenage girl like her want? A new wardrobe maybe? Expensive perfumes and a trip to Paris to get some? A new I-phone? Shoes? Maybe even lots of shoes? In the blink of an eye, Herod could easily get any of those things!

After a bit of sideline whispering with her mother, however, the party is drawn to a screeching halt when they hear her request.

'The head of John the Baptist on a platter!' She demands. The room settles into shocked silence. Talk about a party stopper! The impish smile on Herod's face disappears as he sobers up in a hurry.

'Did I hear her right?' He asks the person sitting next to him.

'Oh, you heard her right.' The person says wondering what Herod would do next.

Now, to be sure, there was no love lost between Herod and John the Baptist. Herod had already put John the Baptist in jail because John had rebuked Herod for wanting to marry his own brother's wife, Herodias. And, yes, for those of you paying attention, Herodias is the mother of the young girl who had just made this bizarre request.

Being the crafty political strategist Herod was, however, Herod knew that killing John the Baptist would cause more trouble than it was worth. John was quite popular with the masses and harming John would risk a riot. So, keeping John safely tucked away in a prison cell was enough for Herod. He couldn't cause much trouble from behind bars.

Surely, Herod didn't see this one coming. What would he do? If he refuses his step-daughter's request, he would be back tracking on an oath he had made and that would not bode well with those looking on. It would make them wonder what other oaths Herod would renege on. On the other hand, if he grants his step-daughter's wish, it could end up being a public relations nightmare.

Herod opts for the oath keeping option, giving the step-daughter what she wants. And, as a result, this turns out to be a birthday banquet no one would ever forget!

The second banquet is nothing like the first. It takes place on the heels of Jesus and his disciples learning the news that John is dead. John was a close friend to Jesus. Some have even surmised that John had been his mentor for a time. So, it's not a stretch to imagine just how deeply Jesus and his disciples were hurting.

Understandably, Jesus needs some time alone to grieve, to weep, to pray. So, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place, we're told. I guess leaks are nothing new, however. Somehow the crowd gets hold of the news of where Jesus is heading so they scramble their way along the shore line to meet him there.

Unlike Herod's banquet, this banquet began not on a celebratory note but on a note of deep sadness and loss. Jesus had no desire to host any sort of party. No, Jesus just wanted some time alone to grieve.

That was not to be, though. Jesus' boat pulls ashore and standing before him is a large crowd. Hungry for a word from the Lord. Hungry to

know that God had not forgotten them. Hungry for relief from the hard, anguished, and sorrow filled lives that defined their being.

Jesus had not invited them to this banquet. They had invited themselves. They had pushed and shoved and forced their way in, not out of maliciousness but out of desperation like that truckload of dead and almost dead immigrants recently found in an overheated, abandoned truck in San Antonio. They too were desperate. They had handed over everything they had with the slimmest of hope that the crook who organized this trip would make good on his promise to give them a fresh start.

The world is filled with people like this. People willing and ready to take advantage of people's desperation. People always scheming and plotting their next move to line their pockets with little regard for those whom they hurt along the way.

Thankfully Jesus is far from a calculating, hand rubbing opportunist. Jesus is no Herod looking for a way to manipulate his way to the top with a self-glorifying birthday party.

Even in his grief and weariness, Jesus sees these people and feels only one thing – compassion. Their hurt makes Jesus hurt. Their desperation makes Jesus desperate to minister to them. Their hunger, not his, is the reason behind the banquet Jesus would soon host.

After a day of ministering to the crowd, the disciples tell Jesus that he needs to send the crowd to town so they can get some food.

Jesus' response takes them by surprise. 'No,' Jesus says. 'You give them something to eat!'

The disciples are startled by the order. What is Jesus thinking? They're not Herod with the means to make even a small dent in the deep hunger of a huge crowd like this!

It is the story so many of us latch onto. It is the hue and cry that even defines the church. 'Who are we?' We ask. 'I mean, just look at us, being asked to do more and more with less and less. Send them home, Jesus. We can barely make ends meet. We barely have enough time to breath. Our schedules are full, our pews are empty, our hands are old and tired, our bank accounts are stretched, our resources are meager...send them

home. And just to prove our point, look, this is all we have - five loaves and two fish. What is that among so many?!

‘Ahhh,’ Jesus says with a smile. ‘It’s enough.’

Jesus then proceeds to satisfy the hunger of that huge crowd of over 5,000 people. Herod might have his caterers but we have Jesus. Herod might have his large coffers but we have Jesus. Herod might have a staff of servants but we have Jesus. Herod might have his musicians and magicians and dancers but we have Jesus. Herod might have the means but we have something better, we have Jesus. In fact, I’m guessing that even a guy like Herod couldn’t have handled a banquet for this many people!

What then, we might ask, what then are we to do? How do we tap into this huge reserve supposedly at our disposal? What secret account is it hidden in? Tell us Jesus.

What’s interesting about this story is that Jesus doesn’t just make food appear out nowhere. Jesus doesn’t say something like his Father said when he was creating the universe - ‘Let there be lunch’ and, suddenly, there was lunch. No. Remember that five loaves of bread and the two fish the disciples showed Jesus? Jesus uses that. And I’m pretty sure that when Jesus first told his disciples to bring those items to him, they balked. It’s what we tend to do.

‘Hey, Jesus, that’s our lunch. We’re hungry too you know! If we have something leftover, which we doubt will be the case, we’ll let you have that but first we need to feed ourselves.’

The disciples eventually relent and somewhere between the breaking and distributing, that small lunch turned into a banquet that must have made Herod’s banquet seem like an appetizer.

Jesus took those five loaves and two fish, he looked up to the heavens, he blessed and broke the loaves, and then he gave it to the disciples who, in turn, gave it to the crowds and there ended up being twelve baskets filled with leftovers.

I wonder what would happen if we too took not just our leftovers but the substance of our time, our energy, our resources, and our gifts and handed them to Jesus? What would happen if we lifted them up to

heaven, blessed them, and then gave them away? It's important to remember that not only was the crowd's deep hunger satisfied that day but so too were the disciples as, afterwards, they sat around looking at each other saying, 'You know if I take one more bite I'm going to burst.' Never would they have felt so satisfied if they had not given that bread and fish away.

And you know, I think it's true. Recently I've been trying to up my giving to the church just as much as I can. It's a stretch. That paycheck goes quickly after it's deposited into our account. Yet, I've been trying – five more dollars this week, ten dollars the next, back tracking a bit the week after because fear gets the best of me and then trying again the week after that and you know what, miraculously, I've yet to go hungry. In fact, missing a meal or two might even do me some good but that hasn't happened! It's amazing what Jesus can do when we set our minds towards helping him. It even has a way of defying our mortal laws of economics!

'On the same night Jesus was betrayed, he took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, 'Take, eat, this is my body [not my leftovers] this is my body which is broken for you: do this in remembrance of me.'

What's amazing is that to this day, we continue to break this bread and, lo and behold, there's still enough to go around. It's just amazing.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.