

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 14: 13-21

PRAYING NOT TO LOSE

Without looking at your Bibles, does anybody know what Jesus had just heard that caused him to withdraw to the wilderness, to a deserted place? The very first verse we read said, “Now when Jesus heard this. . .” What was “this”? What news could have driven him. Some know; I can see it, and they want to tell. His cousin had just been killed. His head had been taken and served up on a platter. His cousin, who had understood possibly even before his own mother, who Jesus was. His cousin, John the Baptist, who had announced his coming: A kingdom coming into our midst. And Jesus went away to search for some compassion, some understanding, some solace. He went away aggrieved. If you have ever grieved that deep, soul-rendering grief of losing a loved one—someone that understood and who was your advocate, someone who was a friend closer than a brother or sister—if you have ever lost someone dear to you, you understand Jesus’ going away and looking for solace.

And it seems he went away in a boat, because it says when he came ashore, they had already come out from the town to meet them. Now I suppose he could have been going upstream, but I doubt it. I’m thinking he went with the current. I’m thinking that boats are faster than going by foot. And so the crowds had to hurry to be there before him. They also were looking for solace, and he had compassion for them.

What does it mean when we say we are “people of compassion”? How is it that we, as the church of Jesus Christ, two thousand years later after this wonderful miracle, are still praying not to fail? Later on, again, they are confronted with a hungry crowd and somehow they have forgotten what just happened here. And they again ask Jesus, “How will we feed them?” And he fed the four thousand.

What does it mean when Jesus says to them, “You feed them. Don’t send them away. You have compassion upon them.” Often we pray, “Lord, help me to punt. It’s fourth down and inches and I have no confidence in my spiritual defense. All I want to do is get rid of the ball.” That’s what fourth and one punt plays really are. They are a prayer not to lose—right?—even though statisticians tell us when they analyze all the sports data that it’s a better statistical approach to go for it on fourth and one. But what do coaches and good managers and team owners want? More than they want to win, they want to not lose.

Jesus is asking the disciples to risk what they have in their lunch boxes and their baskets, which they see as scarce. Which they, like many people we met this week, saw their circumstances hopeless. This group of young people and their families, this congregation wasn’t praying not to lose. It was praying to make a difference. It was praying that we would offer our very best to those who may have lost any chance that there was hope for their lives.

All week, to anyone who would listen, I would say, "This reminds me so much of Liberia." People who don't believe any more in the possibilities and the opportunities before them. There really isn't very much to do in Hurley. And yet I believe, without exception, every member of this group missed what we did do there every night. We had each other. And every morning when we ate together.

Now I personally will not miss George Rudebush trying to paint me head to toe with something called Cool Seal, after trying desperately to paint this rusty tin roof; trying to mix it together. George had never handled a five-gallon bucket before—clearly. So that afternoon when we start to clean up and I took off my T-shirt, it looked like a bad Rogaine experience. I was covered beneath the fabric of my shirt with an oily mixture of tar and aluminum paint. And yet that's a memory and a glimmer of a prayer that we'd rather try and be imperfect than pray not to lose.

In just a few moments we'll celebrate Jesus' prayer to withhold nothing from us in the sacrament. And we'll celebrate that after all had been fed that day, twelve baskets were collected. Now some will say that's the twelve tribes; some will say that's just a Biblical number. But I think it's so everyone of those disciples had a basket full when they went back to the table where Jesus was waiting, to the blanket spread on the ground; to the table cloth where he had taken the five loaves and the two fish. And I think each one of them had to set that basket down and look him in the eye and say, "I'll stop worrying about failing and start living the way you live—not afraid, but full of confidence. Not praying, "Lord, help us not run out; but Lord, thank you for five loaves and two fish which will be more than enough, by your grace, to feed everyone here."

Let us accept that as God's word for each of us. And let us start praying in a new way with the confidence that came not only in the feeding, but in twelve baskets full of pieces left over.

While we were in Hurley, we went to an independent church—the church of our hostess, Mattie. And while we were there, there was an invitation—really more than one invitation—to discipleship. They were sure that these Presbyterian young people had never met Christ and that they needed to save their souls. Again, George Rudebush rose to the occasion and stood there and told them about his love for Christ. And he was not afraid. Afterwards, some of the people in the Doylestown group and I think some of our own youth said they had never had an invitation experience. This is an invitation—an invitation to discipleship. There are more efficient ways to take up offerings and meet budget. This isn't about efficiency. This is about God saying to each of us, "Come and respond to me the way I have taken the initiative to come to you."

This is not about dollars. This is about our life. And our love for one another and for those we have not even met. Accept God's invitation. Give your heart to Jesus as we worship God in this time.

Amen.