

Matthew 14 Homily – "They Need Not Go Away"

In the name of the Creator, and the Redeemer, and of the Sustainer. Amen.

Good morning.

It is such a joy to be with you at St. Michael's.

Fr. Joshua and I went to seminary together, and we were ordained priests together in Los Angeles a little over two years ago.

I've been grateful for his friendship ever since, and it's a privilege to worship with all of you today.

A couple of weeks ago, I turned forty-five and found myself asking a simple question:

What kind of person am I becoming?

Not just what have I accomplished—

but who am I becoming?

As I sat with today's readings, it struck me that they all begin in places of vulnerability.

Jacob wrestles with God and limps away into the sunrise.

The Apostle Paul writes with a heart broken for his own people.

And before we ever get to the miracle of the five loaves and two fish, Jesus has just learned that his cousin John the Baptist has been executed by Herod.

None of these stories begin in strength.

They begin in grief.

Which makes me wonder if that's exactly where God begins too.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus heard the news about John, he withdrew by boat to a deserted place by himself.

That makes perfect sense.

He's grieving.

He's exhausted.

Sometimes you just need a chance to breathe.

A couple of weeks ago, my wife Laura and I escaped to Big Bear with our dogs, hoping for a little rest. One morning I was listening to the *Pray As You Go* podcast.

That morning's meditation on Jesus' invitation,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens..."

ended with this prayer:

"Ask for the courage to release what is not yours to carry."

I had no idea how much I would need those words.

Within days, **my wife's older brother** was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor, and suddenly our family was on a plane to Oregon.

Hospital waiting rooms replaced mountain trails.

Family meetings replaced vacation.

Instead of learning how to rest,

we were learning how to grieve.

Which is why I heard today's Gospel differently this year.

Jesus steps out of the boat.

He doesn't find solitude.

He finds thousands waiting for him.

And Matthew gives us one of the most beautiful sentences in the Gospel:

"He had compassion for them."

The Greek word for compassion is wonderfully earthy.

It describes being moved in your deepest inward parts—the place where ancient people located their strongest emotions.

Jesus is moved in his gut.

His whole being responds.

Even in his own grief, he sees theirs.

Then evening comes.

The disciples begin doing exactly what I probably would've done.

They're practical.

"This is a deserted place."

"It's getting late."

"We don't have enough food."

"Send the crowds away."

The disciples aren't being heartless.

They're being realistic.

They know their resources.

They've counted the loaves.

They've counted the fish.

There isn't enough.

But Jesus sees the same crowd and says something completely different:

"They need not go away."

I wonder if that's the first miracle in this story.

Before a single loaf is multiplied,

Jesus refuses to send hungry people away.

Over these past couple of weeks, that sentence has become deeply personal for me.

Friends, colleagues, neighbors, and people from every corner of our lives reached out to us.

None of them could cure **my brother-in-law**.

None of them could erase our grief.

But they refused to send us away.

Those days reminded me of something the Church has always known:

We can't carry another person's illness.

We can't carry another person's grief.

But we can carry one another.

And that's exactly what people have done for **my brother-in-law and his family**.

Friends remodeled his bathroom so it would be accessible.

His twin brother built a railing so he could safely get into the house.

Friends and family sent enough food to feed a small army.

One morning I brought coffee and donuts to the hospital so my sister-in-law could step away and breathe.

Another afternoon my assignment was simply to watch the kids.

We watched movies.

Ate popsicles.

Debated whether bleaching my nephew's hair was somehow an urgent priority.

For the record, I wisely left that decision to people with actual parental authority.

Looking back, it's funny what I remember.

Not the MRI reports.

The coffee.

The popsicles.

The hugs.

Love often hides inside details that small.

Nobody could solve the problem.

Everyone kept asking:

"What would be helpful right now?"

I have come to believe that is one of the holiest questions we can ask.

Not,

"How do I fix everything?"

But,

"What would be helpful right now?"

As I reflected on today's Gospel, I realized that's exactly what Jesus teaches the disciples.

They're asking,

"How are we going to feed five thousand people?"

Jesus asks,

"What do you have?"

Five loaves.

Two fish.

"Bring them here to me."

Jesus never asks the disciples to begin with abundance.

He asks them to begin with what they have.

I can't heal **my brother-in-law**.

I can't take away Laura's grief.

I can't control the future.

Jesus doesn't ask the disciples to perform the miracle.

He asks them to bring the bread.

Faithfulness is bringing what we have.

The miracle belongs to God.

Jesus blesses the bread,

breaks it,

and gives it to the disciples.

The disciples give it to the crowd.

The miracle passes through human hands.

That is still how the Church works.

God's compassion reaches the world through ordinary acts of love.

A meal.

A hospital visit.

A text message.

A listening ear.

Watching somebody's children.

Simply showing up.

We often wish we could change the world.

But Christ asks us to take the next faithful step.

Before parish ministry, I spent ten years as a hospital chaplain.

I thought I understood sickness and suffering.

Then it became personal.

There is a world of difference between standing beside a hospital bed wearing a clerical collar and clergy badge and standing there as a brother-in-law.

I discovered that love is less about saying the right thing and more about staying when there is nothing left to say.

It became coffee.

Quiet presence.

Another trip to the hospital.

Showing up again tomorrow.

Prayer became less something I was saying
and more something I was breathing.

Sometimes it was simply:

"Lord, help."

Perhaps prayer is not always about explaining suffering.

Perhaps it is about refusing to abandon one another inside it.

Friends, I don't know what hunger you brought with you this morning.

Maybe it is grief.

Loneliness.

Fear.

Exhaustion.

Maybe someone you love is sick.

Maybe your family feels fractured.

Maybe you are carrying something no one else knows about.

Hear the good news again.

The disciples say,

"Send them away."

Jesus says,

"They need not go away."

And that leaves me with the same question I've been asking myself since my birthday:

What kind of person am I becoming?

Am I becoming someone who sends people away?

Or someone who invites them to stay?

Am I becoming someone who waits until I have enough to offer?

Or someone who offers what little I have?

Bring what you have.

Bring it to Christ.

The miracle never depended on how much the disciples had.

It depended on whose hands they placed it in.

Every time the Church chooses presence over avoidance...

compassion over calculation...

every time we refuse to let someone suffer alone...

the bread is still being broken.

The miracle is still happening.

In the name of the Creator, and the Redeemer, and of
the Sustainer.

Amen.