

IN THE STRUGGLE

Sermon preached by the Rev. Kellie Anderson-Picallo

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Scripture: Matthew 14:1-21

Hello, how are you, I'm great! Has it ever happened to you, that some well-meaning person has asked you how you are doing on a day you are ...*not* great? It seems to be our culture, that we rush right through our response of 'just fine!' without giving pause to say how we really are. Or maybe we're on the other end of it – eager to ask a friend how they are doing. Do we listen as well as we could? – listen to see if they *really* are great? I'd like to think that us people of faith are the ones who can really slow it down, who aren't afraid to hear that someone might be struggling a little and maybe we can be a source of comfort in just that moment.

Because you see, sometimes things are not so great for all of us. These days, tough times seem to be especially plentiful. Money might be tight with no new solutions to help; we thought our job was secure but now we're not sure; news arrives that a friend we haven't thought of in so long just passed away; Or just this morning we found a lump and we're sure its nothing, but....

It can be a struggle sometimes, to live these lives of ours. Two weeks ago a memo went out to Presbyterian Churches across the United States asking for their prayers for the churches along the coasts of Louisiana. It seems these hearty and resilient churches have considerable experience rebuilding after hurricanes. But they have no experience to rebuild after liters of oil that are floating to their shorelines, devastating the livelihood and environment of so many church members. That cap may have stopped the Gulf oil leak at 86 days, but the impact of the oil is just now beginning to spill into these communities. Pray for these churches, the memo shared. Pray for the strength of these people in this time of struggle.

And so many of us have been touched during this difficult time in the economy. There was a time when the words economic and stimulus would never have been in the same sentence together. Now we've had our fill of the word bail-out. Recently, I stepped on the M14 crosstown bus and when I sat down the bus driver said, 'Excuse me Ma'm, can I ask you a question?' Surprised that a New York City bus driver might want to ask me directions, I said, 'of course.' He turned to me and looked me squarely in the eye. "Can you explain to me where all that bail-out money went? Because I can't figure it out and they are about to cut all of our bus routes and I am so mad." I must have looked like someone he thought could answer his question. But I had to confess that I was as mystified as he was as to where much of the stimulus money had been allocated. My prayers are just that this is working.

It's in these difficult times that we must turn to the Gospels. To let the Good News comfort us...and to also take heart that in times of struggle we are not struggling alone.

The miracle of the loaves and fishes. Do you know this story that Martha read for us this morning from the Gospel of Matthew? It may be familiar to many of us. In fact, it is one of the first stories we teach our youth here at church school each back to school season. The story of the loaves and fishes is one of the great miracle stories of Jesus and the only miracle to have been told in all four gospels...Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all did not want us to miss this one.

Here's how this Bible story goes: The crowds sought out Jesus who had left in a boat to a deserted place and urged him to come at once. He did and healed the sick of the large crowd that gathered. When this sizable crowd grew hungry Jesus multiplied the five loaves and bread and two fish. He then turned to his disciples and said, 'You feed them' as a reminder that Jesus is in charge of the miracles but it is us people who still need to do the work. The hungry people were all fed and leftovers remained.

The story of the loaves and fishes is one of the greatest miracles we have in the Gospels. Which is why...we may not be really reading it anymore. It can happen sometimes, when a story becomes so familiar that we don't really explore it, challenge it. Let's think about this - when we open our Bibles we often head to just certain stories or passages. We might use those chapter titles which neatly summarize stories so each message stands out. LOAVES AND FISHES. Except we must remember that the Bible was not written this way, with titles and summaries to organize things so neatly. Each Book of the Bible was often one continuous scroll where one story flowed into the next. And sometimes what comes **before** a story, or a miracle, can be just as important as the message itself.

Many of us may know the miracle of the loaves and fishes. But few of us may remember the events leading up to it, the events that outlined the death and beheading of John the Baptist.

It's no wonder why stories like this are skipped over on Sunday mornings – after a long week where we are all dry and thirsty for God's Word we often go right for the stories that satisfy the quickest – the miracles, the joyful stories that lift us up. But to be in relationship with the Bible means we must recognize the in-between stories as well. This one is particularly gruesome and sad– John, the man who prepared the way for our Lord to come, who baptized Jesus, who once feasted off of locusts and honey...was executed at the whim of a girl whose family was fighting with Herod, the ruler of the government. Herod was afraid of escalating these family problems further and so he agreed to grant any wish to the daughter of Herodias...even if it was to have the prophet John's head brought to her on a dinner platter.

And this part we want to pay careful attention to – how the end of *that* story weaves into the next few verses of the loaves and fishes. The Bible says that the disciples

came and took the head and the body of their beloved John the Baptist and buried it and then went and told Jesus. Can you imagine the grief of all these men? Can you imagine how much they didn't want to be the messengers to Jesus of this horrible news, to tell him that his cousin was dead at the whim of a dancing girl? Indeed, Jesus took this news terribly hard because the beginning of verse 13 tells us that Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place to be by himself.

By himself. That is important. He is sad, he is grieving and he is struggling. We sometimes rush over these early verses because we're so eager to get onto the miracle where the crowds come because they want *him* to start healing *them*. Maybe because it's uncomfortable to see Jesus struggling, to be so human. But God gave us the Word made Flesh – a real person with real feelings. Jesus had just lost his cousin, the man who devoted his whole life to making way for the Lord and lost this man to a violent murder. It is a vivid reminder to Jesus and everyone that God's prophets were not immune to death. If anything they were more likely to die violently than quietly. And sooner rather than later.

It's just one verse – 'Now when Jesus heard this he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place' but let's linger over it for a minute. Have things ever been so tough for you that you've withdrawn? Maybe you picked up and left to go somewhere else to be alone and pray or maybe just withdrew a little from everything around you. Maybe it was after dealing with a grief of your own and all the complicated feelings that surround losing someone you love.

We don't have to have lost our cousin to violent murder to feel the injustice that there are parts of our lives that are absolutely not fair. But it is in these moments that we can turn to our gospel for comfort that Jesus...understands. Has been there. Jesus will listen to us when we pray and grieve and complain and worry and rejoice...because Jesus has lived through it too.

And isn't it interesting that the only miracle recorded in all four gospels – this miracle of the Loaves and Fishes – is the one that happened just after Jesus was the saddest. He turned his grief into something beautiful that touched thousands...do you think that may be hope for us? We also want to skip over the hard parts and just wait for our miracles. But...Perhaps...in the moments when *we* struggle and know nothing will ever be the same, God can lead *us* to something new and amazing we never saw coming. It is the extra measure of spirit of those five loaves of bread and two fish.

There is a modern day prophet – a better word might be theologian – named Dietrich Bonhoeffer who writes some beautiful words about struggling. And he should know – his work for justice cost him his life in World War 2. Bonhoeffer writes, "The test of whether we have truly found the peace of God will be in how we face the sufferings that befall us. There are many Christians who bend their knees before the cross of Jesus Christ well enough but who do nothing but resist and struggle against every affliction in their own lives. They believe that they love Christ's cross but they hate the cross in their own lives. They sought peace for their own sake. It was no peace

with God because whoever loves the cross of Jesus Christ, whoever found peace in him will begin to understand there is suffering and only then will they be able to say with Scripture, we also rejoice.

To live out a life of faith is to live out the incredible highs of joy... and to take God with us through the rough, tough struggles of life. Just like Jesus did. To know that when we ask someone, 'Hi how are you?' that their answer may not be 'great' and we can be a source of Christian compassion.

I like how the Spanish language puts this. The Spanish translation of 'Hi how are you?' is '*Como Estas?*' But instead of the Spanish equivalent of *fine...* or *great* you might hear a common response in the Spanish language: *Aqui en la lucha*. Which means, *here in the struggle*. Como Estas? I'm here in the struggle. How are you?

Friends, today is August 1st, the halfway mark of our summer season. What will the next few weeks bring ahead? We pray for better news for all of us, for all of our neighbors those as close as a New York city bus stop and those around the world who are rebuilding. As Brothers and Sisters in Christ let us walk together, striving to make this earth just a little more like it is in heaven, lifting each other up with God's love as we go along...here in the struggle.