

The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Isaiah 55:1-5

Romans 9:1-13

Matthew 14:13-21

Salome knew exactly what she was doing. Historians claim that Salome was a teenager at the time. Herodias was Salome's mother. Herodias married one of her uncles and then another. She was now with King Herod. It was an unlawful marriage. John the Baptist raised his voice against this unholy union. For this he was arrested. Herodias had a plan and she employed her daughter to execute her hellish scheme. Herodias no doubt knew Herod's weakness, his debauched mind, his carnal lust. Salome was deployed and she danced. In an opulent setting, Herod's new wife's daughter danced for him. And she pleased him. She so pleased him that Herod offered her a blank check as recompense. Salome rushed to her mother to be instructed what to ask for. She returned to Herod and said: "Give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (Matthew 14:8).

You likely have lost someone you love. You have buried friends, relatives, perhaps someone who has died an unnatural death. You have not lost anyone like this. This is gross. This is profane. This is supremely dark and demented and devilish. A platter is used for sumptuous food, to elevate the joy of a banquet, to celebrate the fruits of the earth, fruits which God gives. Salome, after dancing provocatively for the King, asks for the greatest prophet's head to be delivered to her on a platter. Such is the culture of death; it has no shame. Herod, a despicable man, gave the dancing girl what she wanted.

Jesus hears of this and His reaction is to withdraw to a desolate area. Say the word to yourself – desolate. A land deserted, abandoned because of barrenness, a wasteland, arid and forlorn, void of life, void of joy, void of hope; desolate. St. Matthew puts that word in the immediate context of John's death at the hands of vile, base and gruesome human beings. "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself" (Matthew 14:13). A desolate place; because of our sin, this whole world is a desolate place. Imagine the grieving heart of our loving Lord. His cousin, the one who prepared the way for the Christ, beheaded as a price for a lap dance. Soak in that broth for a moment and tell me we don't live in a desolate place.

Have you felt the desolation of the world in your own heart? Have you felt the desolation of your own sin and longed for a way to withdraw, to escape? Have you felt the log in your own eye and still complained about the speck in your brother's eye? That is desolation. Have you rejoiced at the forgiveness of God for your many sins and then erupted in rage over someone who slighted you? That is desolation. It is in you and it is in me. Hiroshima on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945 and Eden after Adam ate what he was commanded not to eat – put them together in your mind for they reflect each other. Those news reels, those photographs of the Japanese city leveled after a five-ton atomic bomb was dropped on it and the spiritual condition of our world apart from Christ... both are desolate. **Our Lord came into that kind of world, this desolate place.** Our Lord, the Prince of heaven, the Lord of glory, He felt it – our desolation.

The people flocked to Him. They followed Him, on foot, from their towns. In pursuit of Him, a great crowd, followed Him to a desolate place. In need, they followed Him. Suffering from all manner of maladies, this crowd followed Christ. When He came ashore, He saw them. Saw them. Not just their faces; He saw their condition. Compassion filled His heart. He sees them and compassion flows from His divine heart, a natural product of genuine love. **Compassion does not stand idly by.** Compassion acts. In the midst of His grief, Jesus extends Himself to that crowd. He heals them. It is an exchange unlike any other. Their sickness – He takes it. His health – He gives it. He has the ability to heal and He does not withhold His love even to the desolate. That love reaches its apex on the cross – the most desolate place there has ever been. Calvary was made desolate with our greed and our idolatry and our petty selfishness. The healing that Jesus gave to those people flowed from Calvary's sacrifice. Our health comes with a price. He is willing to pay. Our poverty, our addiction, slandering our neighbor, our pitiful self-righteousness, our bullying, our inner desolation – He takes it, all that is dark and demented and devilish, he takes it; and suffers for it. Jesus' blood flowed to bring healing to the nations.

That evening overlaps with this morning. You think that so much has changed? I tell you, it hasn't. Jesus at work. Jesus with the people. Evening comes and it is a desolate place, nowhere to find food. The disciples are aware of the people's need; what they do not see is the Divine Provision, the One who is the Bread of Life, He who knows so much more about the people's need, your need. Cut them loose, the disciples say. "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves" (Matthew 14:15). Have there been voices attempting to send you away? Have there been voices attempting to shoo you away from the Divine Service, to prevent you from being fed with the bread of life? Is that the voice that you want to hearken to – a voice that fails to see the desolation in your soul and the Provision which God extends to you in His Son?

Jesus doesn't want them to leave – He wants them fed. He wants His healing to be extended into a meal. Like Israel in the desert, the people were hungry. Like Israel in the desert, there was no food. Like Israel in the desert, God had a plan. This Divine Service is His plan. Bread from heaven, His Son's body given, His blood shed – that is the remedy for desolation, the remedy for sin, the remedy (the only remedy) for death. Compassion gives. Christ was not done giving on that day. Have the people sit down. Make My people lie down in the green pastures of my presence for their Good Shepherd will extend to them a banquet unlike any other. It was a miracle. Two fish and fives loaves – it fed thousands. That evening and this morning overlap. He performed that miracle precisely because He makes you to lie down in peace at His altar and places in your mouth the healing bread of His body and heaven's intoxicating wine, the wine of His blood. If you believe that Christ wants us to discard this Divine Service then you are listening to the wrong voices.

I am a poor sap who traipsed off to Barrensville because that is where Jesus is – you are the same as me. We are not here to sing sappy songs and gain some sort of spiritual strength by listening to a self-help motivational speech. We are here to receive the body and blood of the living Christ. I am desolate without Him and you are the same. I hunger and thirst for righteousness for I have none of my own and it is only in this sacrament that I am fed. We are here because He is here. He said: "Where I am there my servant will be also" (John 12:26). That evening and this morning overlap. They all ate and were satisfied. He feeds us with holy food and the

longing of our hearts finds its satisfaction in Him. Don't deny it – that reality needs to come to the fore in this strange time. So many appear to just be walking away. Nah, I don't need the bread of life. Can you imagine people leaving as the sun set and Jesus is taking bread and giving thanks, breaking it and then having the disciples distribute it to the people?

Jesus is manna (bread from heaven) in our desolation. Every single one of you is going to go out into your station in life on Monday and it will be unlike anything you have been through before – a continuation of a six-month Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. Children not going to school. Small businesses are imploding. Cultural convulsions, which began as tremors are becoming Richter scale events. Depression is on the rise. Hope is a diminishing resource. Fear is twisting vulnerable people in knots. Government is orchestrating some of this dysfunction. Lukewarm Christians are contributing their ill-conceived counsel – that the church is non-essential, just stay home. Your spiritual vitality is in the balance. I guarantee that those who went home after being served by Christ in that desolate place were buoyed, uplifted. They made their way home knowing that they had a God who loved them, who came into their desolation to bring heaven to them, to give them a taste of the Promised Land, a place abundant with light and life and holiness, to give them the calming assurance of God's real presence. A compassionate Savior, who sees you in your desolation, that is what He has given you today. This is a foretaste of the feast to come. This is a garden place, a new Eden, an oasis of grace, a new creation. Green pastures, still waters and the restoration of my soul – O what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day.