
They Need Not Go Away

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Ashley Carr
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 13, Year A

In a headline, the story reads: Loaves, fish, and hungry people: look at what Jesus did! He fed people, like a bunch of people, and he did it from seemingly nothing—it's not like he'd been in the kitchen all day. That's pretty cool as far as miracles go. Did you know that this story wherein Jesus feeds more than five thousand people is recorded in every one of the four gospels, the only miracle, and he performed a lot of them, to make the cut four times. So, yeah, we know the story, we've heard it five thousand times, but it seems like something different happened there. Something big happened there that day. So big that four different accounts of it had to be included in the book we hang our hats on.

Of course, what we remember from the story is the hunger, the crowd, and the wild trick that Jesus does. Our logical minds immediately try to understand it. Some of us want to know how, others want to know why, and many of us are wondering where Jesus is in the checkout line. But, if we could understand it, then it wouldn't be a miracle. Undeniably, the miracle itself is awesome and thank God for such a thing. But there might be more to the story than the flashy headline. There might be more to this miracle than ooo look what Jesus can do.

The first thing we have to do is understand what's happening around this moment. When we meet him this morning, Jesus is coming off of some devastating news. John the Baptist, his prophet, his confidant, the guy who baptized him has just been brutally murdered. Remember the head on the platter thing? That's tough news to get. So, Jesus is sad. Fair. The disciples are also sad—John was their companion too. So, there they all are, sad, but the crowds don't care. People and pressures are mounting, they want, they need, more and more from this band of divine brothers. But the guys are sad, and, like most of us, their instinct is to isolate. Jesus himself has fully boarded a ship and he's out of there to be alone, to collect himself, to stop work for just a moment.

Nope.

Here they come.

I like to imagine the sweet disciples out there trying their best to keep the crowds away, but it's out of control, the people are closing in, the disciples are trying to keep the crowds away from Jesus, but they can't do it, and so eventually they have to loop Jesus in. They're like, okay man, you're grieving, and we can't keep them away so why don't you come and talk to them. You know, just send them away, they're hungry and sort of nutty, send them on to town for dinner. And here's where we really see something special in Jesus. He wants to be alone, he wants some space, he has all the power, and still he says, "they need not go away."

They need not go away.

Did he want them to? Probably. Could he have made them go? Absolutely. But he didn't. He said they need not go away. Stay. Let's all stay together. Everything we need is right here.

The story is not really the food that the crowd is after, or the sadness that Jesus and his friends are saddled with. The story is about Jesus teaching us that good work, good stuff, good goodness happens when we're together in community. The story is about Jesus telling us that because we are made by God, we have everything we need in each other. When we're together, we can work through, well, everything.

But still, no one ever calls it the miracle of Jesus saying they need not go away. It sounds pretty miraculous to me.

In 2011 my father died somewhat unexpectedly. It was properly sad. In the days after he died, there was so much to do, logistics to coordinate, feelings to navigate, a eulogy to write, it was exhausting. We had a big funeral in Sewanee, and like good Episcopalians, we threw a good party afterwards. There were so many people at our house requiring so much small talk and people telling me that they hadn't seen me since I was knee high to a grasshopper and all that kind of stuff. More exhaustion. I navigated my way through the crowded house to the back patio where I planned to get a moment to breathe. Out there I did not find solitude, but rather, I found my friends. Carloads of friends who came from near and far. Young people, my people! They had swiped a sandwich tray and several options from the bar, they were laughing and enjoying each other. They didn't stop when I appeared. We sat out there talking and laughing for hours. It was not exhausting, save for the that copperhead I had to kill, but that's another sermon altogether. I remember the night being fun, not sad, until it was over. Eventually, the cars of friends who drove up from Atlanta had to pack up and head back. I did not want them to go. I pleaded, I'll find you a couch, I'll pitch my tent, just don't go.

They had to go away, but not because I kicked them out.

When they were gone, of course I still had family and plenty of those old folks around me, but slowly they, too, had to go until the house was quiet and the sun set lonely on exhaustion and grief. The sting stung harder than it had in the days before.

Without anyone recognizing it in that moment, my friends taught me the same lesson that Jesus teaches in this big fancy miracle story. We do best when we're together. We heal when we have our people to lean on. We can take comfort in crowds because there's someone there who can hold our joys and our sorrows. There's someone to offer a beer and a sandwich, or a fish, I guess. No matter what's happening, people together matters.

They need not go away, Jesus teaches. We need not go away.

Of course, when we don't isolate, we open ourselves up to the absolutely asinine things that people say sometimes, but they mean well. What Jesus is trying to get us to understand is that it's not about the words. It's not about what they feed us. It's about that thing that Jesus made real for us it's about incarnational life, living in real life with real feelings among real people. Not alone. It's about opening up our hearts to be softened by love before they're calcified by solitude.

They need not go away.

Now, don't get me wrong, school starts tomorrow and I'm going to rejoice in the solitude of my house after waving goodbye to the teacher and two students that I live with. There's value in being alone. Especially if you're a parent at the end of the summer. But I'll be so excited to get them all back at the end of the day to hear all about every single thing good, bad, and in between about the first day of school.

Jesus fed a lot of people that day, somehow. But he also taught us that we need not go away. That community holds us together. That so many miracles big and small happen with people. In hospital rooms with nurses and doctors and husbands and mothers, we welcome new life. In our prayers on Sunday morning, we sit shoulder to shoulder with friend, enemy, and stranger with whom we break the same bread. When two sweet souls share vows and make a covenant in front of each other and God, legally there has to be at least one other person involved.

Our lives unfold together, not alone.

So, do as Jesus does, and don't send them away. Bring us whatever you got, we can handle it. There is nothing too big or too small that deserves your walls going up and hiding away alone. They need not go away. You need not go away. Stay in the crowd. We've got each other, and, miraculously, Jesus meets us there.