

August 2, 2020 Pentecost 9A  
The Power of Interruptions  
Matthew 14:13-21

Today's Gospel reading contains one of my favorite things and one of my least favorite things. One of my least favorite things is interruptions and one of my favorite things is food. Let's start with food.

Have you ever noticed how many Jesus stories involve food?

As often as he was praying, he was sharing food. The grilled fish on the shore after the resurrection. Feeding 4000. Feeding 5000. Eating with sinners. Turning water into wine.

Late in his ministry, he even made himself present in bread and wine – staples in the Mediterranean diet, then as now—but He did it to give us himself in a miraculous, sacramental way.

Food: It nourishes, brings pleasure and comfort, fills us up – sometimes makes us too full.

Without food, we are cranky, confused. We might lose our way, become disoriented, lose balance.

Food: It's basic, necessary, essential.

When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, they were given manna for food: nothing fancy, just filling. The people became so bored eating manna day after day that they complained to God; and yet, they were fed.

Today's gospel tells another story of food – lots of food. There is so much food, that they have some left over!

This isn't a banquet like the wedding of Cana story in John's gospel, but food to tide one over, food for a journey, simple food: bread and fish. This isn't even a meal, really. It is food to just get by. The food of our gospel story is basic fill-the-hole-in-your-stomach food, something to take the edge off, something for survival.

The people on that hillside long ago were not friends and family gathered for an occasion, so much as people who wandered away from home, seeking Jesus.

We know the story as "The Feeding of the 5,000," one of the miracles of Jesus. Those listening closely know that it was actually many more than

5,000: the count was taken of men, "besides women and children." How many would that be altogether, do you think?

So: Did it really happen as Matthew records? Where did the food come from? What did they do with the 12 baskets of leftovers?

Questions like these are so often the focus of discussion of this story. But is this even what the story is about? And however it happened, is this really a story about food?

Consider again the story we have of Jesus from Matthew's gospel: "*When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.*" What we're not told in reading just today's portion is that he was in a boat, withdrawing, because he had just learned of John's death. John, his cousin, John who had baptized him.

It wasn't the best of times for Jesus. He was trying to get a moment of peace.

And according to the gospel, when the crowds heard that he was near, that he was drawing apart, "they followed him on foot from the towns."

So he fed the crowds, and after he dismissed the people, he again went off by himself.

He set out to do one thing: to get some space and some time away. This proved to be difficult for him, as we read in today's story.

Is this familiar to you?

Rest, time apart, a few minutes alone, a break, some space – it's something that we all seek at the end of a busy day, at the close of a tiring week.

Jesus was interrupted and responded, and then went on with what he was doing.

But there is a word here we cannot overlook. Compassion. "*When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them...*" He was moved by their needs to set His own needs aside. He didn't just sympathize or feel sorry. He was moved to action. That is compassion. And that is at the core of the Gospel. A God whose love moves Him to act— moves Him to act even in the perfect sacrifice of His own son to meet the needs of the world.

Parents recognize this dynamic, and so do clergy. People with demanding jobs, family obligations, social responsibilities – this dynamic is likely familiar to all of us. We get involved in what we're doing, and we don't want to be interrupted or distracted, and so we ignore what is nudging us for attention.

Several years back there was a series of television commercials, There was one in particular which showed different scenes of children wanting attention: "Look what I made in school today!" and "I brought you flowers!" There was another one of a dog wanting attention from family members, and people wanting attention and to spend time with others. In each case, people were distracted, busy, un-interruptable. In each instance, the one seeking attention and time was "filled with joy and wonder in all God's works," what we pray for as a gift for the newly baptized.

In each case, the one seeking attention is ignored, put off.

In each case, it is an opportunity for ministry, for witness to the loving grace of God, missed.

This is, perhaps, one of the most challenging aspects of life: the constant interruptions and inconvenience of answering a call and still trying to get anything done.

Have you ever caught yourself saying, "I didn't get anything done today"? Think, though: Didn't you see some people, make some phone calls, run an errand, send an email?

Even within the interruptions there can be interruptions: You're in a hurry to get out of the house, and you can't find your keys; you find your keys, lock the door, and the telephone rings; as you're rushing to your meeting, you realize that the car is out of gas, and then you remember that you have no money because you forgot to stop by the bank. And so it goes. Have you ever had an experience like that?

Such moments leave us vulnerable to a breaking-in of the Holy Spirit. Each point is a chance to find something lost, to greet a stranger, to learn something new.

In short, it is an opportunity for grace, a chance to bear witness to the Christ in our midst, with all that that means.

Jesus withdrew and was constantly interrupted by people clamoring for attention: Teach us! Heal us! Give us food! Prove yourself!

Lest you be tempted to think of ministry as limited to ordained ministry, those on the altar guild know there is always someone wanting something, right? Parents with children are used to being asked for attention, yes? You might be driving somewhere and stop to loan jumper cables, or walking down the aisle at the grocery store you pick up a dropped box of cereal. A stranger might ask you for directions as you're headed back to your office, or the passenger next to you on an airplane is nervous about flying when you had hoped to settle in for a nap.

These are the kinds of experiences common to all of us. A compassionate response, a helpful effort, *ministry*, happens in the interruptions.

You may like it, you may not – you probably experience a bit of each – but be on the lookout for such interruptions, because there may be something important happening.

We tend to think of interruptions as limited opportunities, small moments, but like the tiny mustard seed of last week's sermon, such interruptions can grow into something we never imagined.

The gospel parables of last week – the mustard seed, the pearl of great price, and so on – all these are stories of God's abundance. So also is this story of feeding many.

Jesus sought time apart, time for himself, quiet time. He was interrupted. And his response? With grace and care, he healed the sick, and he somehow found food for the hungry. However it happened, all were fed. Five thousand men – not counting women and children, of course!

The faithful response to interruption models Jesus in a plentitude of grace.

Yes, the story is about food. Consider, though: It is also about interruption, about blessing, about goodwill, about possibility.

Jesus fed not only their bodies, but their spirits.

This is the message of our gospel story: Allow for interruptions as opportunities to show Christ in the world.

A joyous and generous response to a bothersome interruption is one of the great challenges – and opportunities – of the Christian life.