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Plymouth Congregational UCC
Mat. 14:13-21
31 July 2011

Our reading this morning begins from an odd place. Jesus, we are told has withdrawn himself to a “deserted place.” The Greek calls it *eremon*, which is sometimes translated as “wilderness.” It is the same root we have in the word hermit. All of which is to say this is supposed to be somewhere where Jesus can be alone. On his own. By himself. Except he has his disciples with him. Moreover, he has five thousand men, and an uncounted number of women and children, too. Maybe I’m weird, but this doesn’t sound like a deserted area to me. Unless...what the Gospel is trying to convey here, is a sense of loneliness-among-people--a loneliness-despite-crowds. And this I might believe. I have no doubt that we have all, at one time or another, been surrounded by others and still felt--estranged/alienated/distant/different. Almost alike. And it’s probably fair to say that this experience is all the more disjuncting, jarring, and hurtful, when this kind of loneliness is encountered within tight-knit groups. Or worse yet--at home. Now you’ll have to excuse me here, but I need to tell a story.

I started a new, six-thirty-a.m.-six-day-a-week workout regimen two weeks ago. While I hope that this will yield positive results for me over the long term, it has had one principal effect on my day-to-day life thus far: I take the elevator much more frequently. I am cautiously optimistic that this small act will result in my meeting more of my neighbors, and I hope that I might even make a few friends out of the whole deal. But this past Friday, I had a different kind of experience. You see, although I have managed to rationalize my expanded use of elevators, I almost never take them downstairs. That still seems a little ridiculous to me. But *Friday’s*...Friday’s are lower body days. Friday’s are more squats than any reasonable human should be responsible for. Friday’s hurt. So on my way to Plymouth on this particular Friday, I took the five steps from my apartment door to the point of no return: I could turn right, and take the stairs, or I could press the tauntingly close elevator call button. I pressed the button. And no sooner had I done so, I heard another door on my floor open. “Perfect,” I thought to myself. Now my early morning laziness is a public event. My shame got worse when I saw the guy in full kit, marching in my direction dressed in his Army uniform. While this would normally be nothing more than an easy way to learn his name, this particular Friday morning I was using my camo-patterned, government-issued backpack. He looked me up and down, and he too elected to take the elevator. We made the kind of small talk that always happens between an active duty soldier and someone tipping their hand. “Are you in the Guard?” he eagerly asked me. “I was a Navy corpsman, actually.” “Oh. You were?” he asked, with a tint of loss in his voice. “Yes sir, got out a few years ago.” And with that, the elevator doors opened, and I said goodbye to the young lieutenant, with a hint of loss in my voice. We were almost alike.

I may still wear pieces of my past life from time to time, but I could not in good conscience stand up here (or in that elevator) and claim some personal equity on the borrowed service of those who actually deployed. You see, my stripes were earned by good grades and length of service. Two of my ribbons were earned in basic. The third is awarded to every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine who served anywhere, anytime after September 11th. So I can stand up here and wax poetic about all things military, but I can only do so as a kind of informed observer.

I tell you this story, not because it’s terribly interesting--I suspect it is just a mundane elevator ride after all--but rather because I have been wandering that particular desert, for a long time.

The service was for me, and many others, understood as a sort of home; an island of misfit toys where we could just show up, and be understood in a real, unspoken way. Often words aren’t even needed for this understanding to be shared between members. Often, just a backpack and a nod gets you in. We are all, almost alike.

This very idea of “Home” has always existed only in the abstract for me. I moved around a lot growing up, and this had two major effects on my worldview. First, I have some nonsensical sports loyalties. I root for a Chicago hockey team, a Phoenix basketball team, a Los Angeles baseball team, and my fantasy

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football team. The second is that I grow more attached to people than places. Consequently I never moved “back home” during summer breaks in college. I generally don’t go “home” for holidays. If I travel at all, I leave my current residence to visit other places I have lived (at least that’s how I think about it). In many ways I have a hard time feeling like I belong in any one place. I used to joke that I was too city for the country, and too Texas for L.A., so I split the difference in the desert we call Arizona. Now that I’ve ended up in the Midwest, I’m not sure how to turn the punch line, but I bet the joke is on me somehow. My point is that there’s always a hint of “outsider” somewhere. And that’s why I love the Jesus we read about today.

This is a Jesus that has just been rejected by his hometown of Nazareth. This is a Jesus who has just learned about the decapitation of his cousin, and fellow prophet, John the Baptist. This is a Jesus who felt as though no one around him could understand what kind of place he was in. This is a Jesus who wanted nothing more than to be left alone, in a deserted place. Until, that is, others had to leave.

When Jesus saw the crowd that had been following him, he did not get angry. He did not lash out as I suspect many of us would, if all we wanted was to be alone and all thousands of others wanted, was to be with us. Instead, he felt compassion for them, we are told. But the English here, doesn’t do the Greek justice. This is not mere pity or empathy. This is not a kind of abstract emotion. This is a real, honest, gut-wrenching reaction. This is a sick-to-the-pit-of-your-stomach experience. Jesus looked out on his followers, and their need pained him. Most commentaries on this passage tend to fault the disciples here for wanting to send the people away. But this doesn’t feel quite right, to me. If we read their actions more generously, they may have just been trying to be pragmatic. If the crowd dispersed, they could find their own food and shelter, and Jesus would be able to take some time for himself. Win win. In many ways, this makes perfect sense. This is a reasonable, rational response to a particular human need. But Jesus makes it very clear that this isn’t the Christian (in a Christ-like sense) response. “They need not go away,” he says, “you give them something to eat.” You. The disciples. I’d like to suggest that it says something beautiful and powerful about our tradition that this is the only miracle story that all four Gospels make sure to include. And this wasn’t even one of Jesus’ miracles. This was a participatory one. Jesus didn’t feed the five thousand. He told the disciples to do it. This Scripture is, at least in part, about the awesome responsibility we as the lower-case united church of Christ have been entrusted with. We are the body of Christ. Ours are the hands and feet that must do God’s work in the world. And before this gets too abstract, let me remind you that the body of Christ is the same one that feels gut-wrenching compassion in the face of great need.

This is certainly a challenging call--a daunting task. But there is good news here, on at least two levels. The first is that we are not alone. No one disciple fed the world. The second is that we have a God that knows what it feels like to not believe that. Ours is a Jesus that felt forsaken, that knew despair, that wandered his own wildernesses. And ours is a God that loved anyway.

Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life’s journey, from one wanderer to another, I want you to know that you can call this place home. Amen.

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