A Sermon for DaySpring

by Brett Gibson

*The Invitation to Christ’s Imagination*

Matthew 14:13-21

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The Feeding of the Five Thousand is one of the earliest stories we teach to our children. It’s the only story—apart from the crucifixion—that appears in all four of the Gospels. We’re drawn to it from a young age for several reasons probably. It’s John’s Gospel that gives us the detail of the boy who has the bread and fish that he shares with Jesus. It’s rare for a child to be singled out in the Bible as exemplary in some way: I liked to imagine I would have been that boy.

It’s also a miracle story that is easy to be in awe of. What if we could defy every scientific law by taking a piece of bread and breaking it in half, then halving those halves, then halving the new halves? We could just keep breaking and halving and sharing until there’s food for everyone.

I think there’s something extravagant about it, too. Because it didn’t have to happen. The disciples’ suggestion to Jesus to send the multitudes into surrounding villages for food was completely reasonable. It’s not like they’re in a terrifying storm that Jesus needs to calm. It’s not like a little girl is about to die, and Jesus needs to heal her. It’s not like a man is riddled with a legion of demons that Jesus needed to cast out. This is simple and unnecessary and extravagant. It’s both basic—provision of the most straightforward of food staples—and extraordinary—from little, a great abundance.

Why *did* Jesus do this? Why defy Occam’s razor: there’s a much simpler solution for feeding this crowd. Why waste a miracle here? And then also, why do all four Gospels tell this story and not the Gerasene demoniac or the raising of Lazarus? What’s so special about this particular story?

In trying to answer that, I think we’re especially helped in Matthew’s Gospel, in which the retreat to the deserted place is in direct response to the events in the verses before: “Now when Jesus heard about *this*, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” What Jesus had just heard about was the death of John the Baptist. It seems Matthew might want us to read these two stories together. Herod had arrested John the Baptist, and in one drunken and debaucherous night, during a banquet, John was summarily executed. Matthew tells us, “[His] head was brought in on a platter…his disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.”

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself…” So, Jesus goes to this deserted place in response to the news of John’s death. There are several times in the Gospels that Jesus is said to be going to a deserted place. Each time he goes, there are different circumstances, though the same motivation seems to drive every retreat. There are many circumstances that drive us to the deserted place. Like Jesus, it may be the death of a friend or family member. It may be fear of the unknown or anticipation about the future. It may be the utter exhaustion of life amidst pandemic or uncertainty about a decision.

We sing about many of those circumstances here at DaySpring in what’s maybe our unofficial family song:

*If your heart needs mending, come away;*

*if your soul needs tending, come away.*

*Come away with me to place where you can be*

*in quiet, slower time; in a simple state of mind;*

*come away with me and rest now. Come away.*

Withdrawing, retreating, coming away…. It implies a starting place, a place of angst or uncertainty or liminality--a place of fear or pain or grief. For Jesus, the starting place—the place from which he designs to withdraw—is the world of Herod. An imperial world of governors, client kings, local elites--a brutal arm of the Roman empire, ordered by a scarcity mentality and domination by status quo. Herod’s world is a world of profanity in which life consists of nothing more than buying and selling, class and order, status and power, measuring and trading, silencing and even murdering the truth-tellers. Note that Herod’s story in Matthew—just like the feeding story that follows it—is a story of a banquet--of people eating together. But as Stanley Hauerwas points out, Herod has a banquet as a show of power to provide food for those who *already* have food. This is Herod’s world. This is Herod’s imagination.

I think maybe this is one of the most important ways we could talk about Jesus in the Gospels. He operates with a different imagination. I remember hearing someone describe the imagination as the place in us where our head meets our heart.

That reminds me, of course, of the 19th century Russian Orthodox saint Theophan, the Recluse who taught his followers that “to pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord.” And that all sounds right to me.

Let’s consider that that is the place of Christ-soaked imagination. Maybe that is what prayer is, at least in part: a surrender to the imagination of the kingdom of God. Jesus, throughout the Gospels, operates with a different imagination, an alternative imagination. Jesus withdraws for lots of reasons, but perhaps most saliently, he withdraws to descend with his mind into his heart, to reimagine the world into which he had been sent.

We’re born largely into a world that possesses Herod’s imagination. An imagination of greed and scarcity in which there’s not enough to go around, and we better protect what’s ours. An imagination of violence and power in which we have to fight for more and vanquish any threats. An imagination of fear and lies in which truth makes one vulnerable, and vulnerability leads to death. Herod’s imagination has been passed down from generation to generation. It’s the air we breathe; it’s the goldfish bowl in which we swim. It’s how things have always been; it’s the status quo.

But Jesus withdrew to the wilderness. And the crowds withdrew with him to the wilderness. This was to be no solitary withdrawal, and Jesus isn’t fazed by that. and in the wilderness, Jesus put his hands on sick people. And in the wilderness, Jesus took bread and treated it the way we see him later treat his last meal: as sacrament. In the wilderness, Jesus took a crowd of seekers out of the profane imagination of Herod and immersed them instead in sacrament. Where the imagination of Herod is an imagination of scarcity, Jesus’ imagination is an imagination of abundance, in which compassion leads to generosity, and eyes open to the great provision of God. Where the imagination of Herod is an imagination of violence, Jesus’ imagination is an imagination of healing--of giving life and sustenance to all. Where the imagination of Herod is an imagination of lies, Jesus’ imagination is an imagination that proclaims the truth that God—not empire, not power, not sword—God is eager to give us everything we need, as Isaiah says, “without money and without price.”

“Jesus offers the crowds an alternative world where compassion overturns status and stands in stark contrast to imperial brutality” (Jae Won Lee in *Feasting on the Word*, 311). Given all this, is it any wonder that when the disciples come to Jesus to tell him to send the crowd away for food that Jesus insists that they feed them? The disciples are proposing sending the crowds to return to the other world for sustenance: a world in which food must always have a price, must always be worked for, must come only from the sweat of one’s brow. Jesus has come to give an alternative imagination to the people, much more in line with what the prophet says:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
    and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
    and delight yourselves in rich food.  
Incline your ear, and come to me;  
    listen, so that you may live.

In the feeding of the large crowd, Jesus “demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity” (Brueggemann). <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/> This is Jesus’ imagination.

I think it’s important for one more point to be made for us. We must not think of Jesus’ wilderness as a safe, quiet place, a bucolic retreat of rest and relaxation. We value beauty and simplicity and retreat—and that is good. And places like DaySpring and many monasteries and retreat centers tend to highlight that side of withdrawal—the resting, the getting-away-from-it-all, the retreating. But when we read this story, when we sing “Come Away,” when we come to DaySpring or CedarBrake or Christ in the Desert, we shouldn’t forget where such wilderness withdrawing leads.

After all, John the Baptist was also a wilderness guy, and we remember very freshly what happened to John. The Israelites were a wilderness people, formed in the crucible of their wandering. Jesus launched his ministry from 40 days in the wilderness marked by intense testing by the devil. The alternative imagination Jesus cultivates and proclaims in the wilderness with the feeding will eventually result in a clash with the empire. We see in the life of Jesus what the dominant imagination does to the true embodiment of the Jesus imagination.

Such wilderness reimagination ought never to be thought of as escape from the world, getting-away-from-it-all. Withdrawing in the way of Jesus is a reorientation that propels us back into Herod’s world with a Christ-soaked imagination.

I need to remind myself in this season that I need a true withdrawal in the way of Jesus. I’m a natural withdrawer—maybe you are, too. But my natural withdrawing is much more about escape, numbing, distraction, ignoring all the chaos and pain swirling around me and inside me just for a moment or two. But the crowds who withdrew with Jesus were led to acknowledge their need, their sickness, their hunger.

Much of what I find I need, especially in these days of pandemic, is what the first step in AA teaches: an admission that we are fundamentally powerless and that our lives are fundamentally unmanageable. So much of contemporary American life is a frenzied attempt at managing what is ultimately unmanageable. Maybe this is one of the gifts we might rediscover in this season of pandemic: that we have little control over much of what happens in our lives. But even though we can’t control the world around us, we do have a say as to what imagination we cultivate.

And that is the invitation today: to descend with the mind into the heart and there stand before the face of the Lord, allowing a new imagination to emerge. Modern-day saints knew this sort of withdrawal and reimagination--people like Fred Rogers who would remind us that every child is beloved just as she is. People like Dorothy Day who would remind us that attachment to the life of Jesus means perpetual nonviolent resistance to the powers of oppression at play in our world today. People like Martin Luther King would remind us that equality in our society is not something that happens by accident but by will and action and intention. These and many other 20th century guides in the way of Jesus knew the way withdrawing with Jesus would send a person, a community back out into the world.

When they wrote the final verse of our family song, our friends Burt and Kurt must have been anticipating the season of pandemic in 2020, the same summer the lectionary would bring us Matthew 14:

*As the days grow longer, come away.*

*As the night grows stronger, come away.*

*Come away with me to a place where you are free*

*to ponder and remember the way of deep surrender.*

*Come away with me and rest now: come away.*

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