



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Proper 14 (A)

#### Withdraw

[RCL] **Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33**

When reading the gospels, it is a good idea to pay close attention to the moments when Jesus withdraws to a deserted place by himself and what he does immediately afterward. We need only back up ten verses from today's story from Matthew to see an example. Earlier in chapter 14, John the Baptist had just died a gruesome death by order of Herod, and after John's disciples buried his body, they went to tell Jesus what happened. The very next verse tells us, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." It seems that upon hearing the news, Jesus needed some time to pray, to reflect, to grieve, to think about what would happen next, and he slipped away to find some quiet. When he returned, a crowd had gathered on the shore. When he saw them, he had compassion for them and began to move among them, curing the sick.

What happens next is one of the most well-known stories in the gospels. Jesus tends to the people gathered until evening falls, and his disciples get worried. They tell him, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus calmly responds, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." The disciples point out that they only have five loaves of bread and two fish, not nearly enough food for this crowd of five thousand men, plus women and children. We know what happens next—Jesus takes the loaves and the fish that they have, looks up to heaven, blesses and breaks the loaves, and gives the food to the disciples to distribute among the crowd. All are fed, with enough left over to fill twelve baskets.

Our gospel story for today picks up at that point: "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray." Again, Jesus seeks out a quiet spot to pray and reflect. When he rejoins the disciples, the boat has traveled across the sea, and he walks over the water to them. When they see him, they are understandably fearful, and Jesus calmly responds, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter, wanting to know that it is truly Jesus, begins walking on the water to join him. He takes a few steps until he notices the strong wind and his fear takes over, and he begins to sink. Jesus catches him and they return to the boat together.

While the feeding of over five thousand people with five loaves and two fish and the act of walking on water are understandably what capture our attention, the quieter moments in these stories are also worth a closer look. Both stories are preceded by Jesus withdrawing to a quiet, deserted place where he can pray. He emerges to mildly chaotic situations—a crowd of people clamoring for his help and a boatful of fearful disciples in the middle of a choppy, wind-swept sea. The worries and fear that he addresses are not irrational—the disciples truly are faced with a crowd of increasingly hungry people in a deserted place, and the Sea of Galilee is a body of water that could be unpredictable, where sudden storms whip up the wind and water as they did in Matthew 8. To be hungry in a deserted place or to be at the mercy of the wind and waves on a boat in the dark are not comfortable prospects, and the disciples' fears are real.

And yet: Jesus' deep well of calm is real as well. With that steady calm, he meets them and helps them to see beyond their fear. And while we may not have miraculous abilities to walk on water or to feed over five thousand people at a moment's notice, this steady calm is instructive for us, too.

There is no shortage of storms in our lives, and it is easy to feel that we are tossed about by them like the disciples' boat on the choppy waves. New griefs, new outrages, new potential disasters rise up and can wear us out. When we never step outside of this chaos, it is difficult to see beyond it. It becomes easy to think that is all there is. And yet Jesus models for us the acts of stepping away to pray, of getting quiet, of returning with a steadiness that can meet those anxious voices without being consumed by them.

The space to be quiet and reflect opens up new perspectives for us on what is possible and on what God might be inviting us to do. It builds in us the spaciousness to meet others when they are in need. And while it may not be feasible for many of us to go to a mountaintop or to hop into a boat to pray, we can, wherever we are, quiet ourselves for a moment. We can take a deep breath when worries or fears arise and ask Christ to be present with us, to fill us with that peace—that steady calm. We can invite that peace of Christ to remain with us as we reengage with the world and to give us fresh eyes to see the way forward and what is possible. And if we practice, perhaps we can begin to bring that calm to others who are facing storms of their own. Perhaps we can offer them that peace of Christ through our own steady presence.

All of this begins with just a quiet moment. May we trust God to help us see what could happen next. Amen.

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