



Pentecost 9-August 2, 2020  
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish  
Matthew 14:13-21

## “Deserted Places”

-Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Several times in scripture, we learn that Jesus went to deserted places. Sometimes, Jesus went to these deserted places because he wanted to. Sometimes he went there to be alone. Other times Jesus had no choice in the matter like when he was led into a deserted place by the Holy Spirit to be tested by the devil. Like Jesus, you too, may want to go to a deserted place to get a break from the busyness of your schedule. Other times, you may have found yourself in a deserted place when you would rather not be alone. It may be during these times; you may have heard Satan tempting you. In today’s familiar story often called the “Feeding of the Five Thousand” (but there likely could have been at least 3 times the number of people to be fed), Jesus went to a deserted place to find peace after learning of the gruesome death of his close friend and cousin John the Baptist who served as an interim pastor for Jesus until he arrived. Instead of Jesus finding peace and rest in this deserted place, the deserted place became flooded with a crowd who had followed Jesus on foot along the shoreline as Jesus got into a boat to get away. To give some perspective, it was as if every man, woman and child in a city about the size of Mitchell, SD left town to find Jesus.*

*I recall my grandfather, Wilmer Questad, telling me the story of when he went to a deserted place. He had made a friend who had moved to a ranch in Harding county in northwestern South Dakota. I don’t remember the exact year it was that he ventured to find his friend in this deserted place. I know it was late enough that he didn’t go there by horse and buggy, but I also know the vehicle that he traveled in didn’t have air conditioning or a navigation system to assist him in locating with air conditioning or after putting his friend’s address in a navigation system to lead him right to his friend’s home. After a long day of travel, Grandpa found the county without much trouble, but finding his friend’s home was another matter. After several unsuccessful attempts after literally following long rabbit trails that led to nowhere, grandpa finally stopped at a cabin after becoming lost in what he described as the middle of nowhere. I suspect it was like when the disciples saw the crowds appear. Evening was fast approaching, and my grandfather was getting hungry and losing his patience. An elderly man appeared from out of this cabin and asked what my grandfather wanted. In my grandfather’s frustration and out of his usual character, my grandfather blurted out if he could help him find his friend’s home in this God-forsaken deserted place. The long pause from this elderly man made my grandfather realize that he may have just said the wrong thing to the wrong person. The old settler finally responded, “This deserted place happens to be my home and it seems that you are the one who is lost”. This elderly man could have sent my grandfather on his way, but instead, he had compassion on him and gave him the directions to his friend’s home. My grandfather was so overcome with his inability to solve his problem, he failed to see the abundance of help that was right in front of him.*

Today's reading from Matthew is one example of many when Jesus went to a deserted place. Some people say that Jesus frequently avoided the crowds because he needed to take care of himself so that he could better care for others. Some people turn this story of Jesus getting away to serve as an example for us to get away. But this is not the main reason all four gospel writers have recorded this story for us. Never does Jesus tell crowds of people to go away until he gets rested up after experiencing some self-care. Jesus doesn't tell the crowds to wait until he has rested for a while. It was the disciples, not Jesus who wanted to send the crowds away. Whenever Jesus withdrew from the crowds, Jesus usually did so to pray. Before Jesus could begin his prayer in this deserted place, the crowd of people had already found him. And when Jesus looked at this crowd, he had compassion for them and cured all who were sick.

We heard about the amount of compassion Jesus has for his people in today's psalm. The Psalmist tells us that the LORD is **full of compassion**, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. In this gospel reading for today, Jesus could have been more like my frustrated grandfather looking for his friend's home. Jesus had good reasons for his compassion gauge to be running on empty and could have responded to the crowd with a sharp tongue and had a reason that day to be short on love. Matthew reminds us of the news Jesus had just received, "When Jesus heard about the beheading of John the Baptist, he withdrew to a deserted place." Jesus was deeply grieving the death of his relative John the Baptist. Undoubtedly Jesus had been informed of the senseless circumstances of a request of a young girl who promised to dance in front of a group of men in exchange for the head of John the Baptist. There are many similarities in the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. When Jesus heard of John's death, he already knew the death he would face, so Jesus went to this deserted place to be alone and to pray. But Matthew writes about the crowd's response to his news, "When the crowds heard about the death of John the Baptist, they followed Jesus". Jesus didn't get time to be alone to grieve. Instead of looking at himself, Jesus saw the crowd and was full of compassion for them.

Jesus could have also been quickly angered when the disciples only saw a deserted place as it was getting late and only saw a hungry crowd. The disciples didn't have Jesus' welfare in mind by wanting to send the crowd away. They didn't want to deal with the crowd. Jesus could have been quickly angered with the disciples when he heard them say, "We have **nothing** here..... but five loaves and two fish." The disciple's way of doing math only determined there was a scarcity of food. They thought they had NOTHING. But Jesus was also slow to become angry with his disciples. Instead of scolding the disciples for thinking the 5 loaves and the 2 fish amounted to nothing, Jesus said, "Bring them to me".

Jesus took the 5 loaves and 2 fish and looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves. When the loaves were broken, they were multiplied, and everyone was fed. This is what Jesus who is full of compassion does. Jesus didn't only distribute daily bread to those who asked for it or to those in greatest need. Jesus fed everyone. The disciples witnessed a miracle in this deserted place.

The picture on the front of the bulletin this week appears to be another deserted place. I was alone in the church when I took this picture. I was the only one sitting in the pews and there was no one in the pulpit. I looked at the hymn books that have not been taken out to sing from for several months. When I looked at the front of the church, I saw the deserted altar when children used to gather for the children's sermon. I was looking at this deserted place in the same way the disciples who saw nothing but 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread. I

*was looking at this deserted place in the same way my grandfather saw nothing but roads leading to nowhere. But this is not a deserted place where there is nothing.*

*You and I don't see things as Jesus sees them. You and I may be like the disciples or my grandfather who saw scarcity and missed seeing who is able to take what we call nothing and bless it and turn it into an abundance. Jesus not only fed everyone that day, but Jesus made each one of the twelve disciples take a basket and fill their baskets with the leftovers of the abundance. What does Jesus do with these leftovers? Jesus sees other crowds approaching him that we cannot see who also are in need. Jesus sees you and has spoken to you from this desert place today. Jesus has not sent you away. You have been fed. Amen.*