

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there...” Jesus has just heard of the death of John the Baptizer, beheaded by Herod in honor of his guests at a banquet he was giving, to keep a promise he had rashly made to the daughter of his wife. We don’t know for sure, but I wouldn’t be surprised if some of Herod’s dinner guests hadn’t gone out to see John, to hear his message, perhaps even be baptized by him. The people of Galilee and Judea thought (correctly) that John was a prophet sent by God, some of Herod’s household undoubtedly knew it as well. But Herod in view of his promise, felt he had to keep it even at the expense of John’s death. There was certainly nothing of compassion in the either the banquet Herod gave, nor in the execution of John.

No surprise there, this is the nature of earthly kingship and the kings who have the power. But’s not the nature of our God, our King whose compassion is his nature. You heard that read a moment ago, Jesus withdrawing to be by himself is followed by the crowds even though he is in a boat. “...he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.” Thousands of people, men, women and children have followed Jesus seeking healing, forgiveness, wholeness. And our King “had compassion for them and healed their sick.”

But Jesus’ compassion didn’t end with healing the sick. Thousands of men, women and children have followed him to a deserted place. Sinners all, like the rest of us, but there to be healed, to escape illness, whatever demons they bore, to seek forgiveness and to hear of the Kingdom of God. The Word of God is the one thing that can heal even death, and it comes first, healing and the meal about to follow are simply the means by which the Word is made manifest in that place and time, call them the exclamation point to finish Jesus’ preaching.

The meal, like the healing, all arises from our King’s compassion for God’s lost sheep. Jesus’ disciples tell Jesus to send the crowds away that they might go to surrounding villages and get something to eat. But Jesus refused to send them away because those gathered there that evening were in his care, he is concerned about their well-being. Through the power of God, five small loaves and two small fish provide enough to feed the entire crowd, with enough left to fill twelve baskets following the meal.

We make much about the miracle of the feeding, how five loaves and two fish can feed so many. But the real miracle here is the compassion of God for his people, his continued willingness to work for the salvation of his people, as stubborn and stiff-necked as they are. God’ compassion and mercy, God’s faithfulness endures forever.

You and I, as stubborn and stiff-necked as we are, saved by grace through faith, do well if we can remain faithful for at least part of the day. God our King and our Savior gives us sustenance through his Word, through his body and blood, invites us to sit with him and receive from his hands the bread of heaven, the cup of salvation.

He calls us to follow him as his disciples, reborn and reformed by his Word, living and walking in the shelter of compassion and mercy. Saved by grace through faith, doing and living our level best to do and to live in a manner that is pleasing to God, loving and doing justice, mercy and walking humbly with God. We are called to give up our obsessions with pride, power, riches, material goods, whatever, to live compassion and caring for others, for all people. We are called to share his Word, to share the grace of God we ourselves have received, to invite others to hear his Word, to believe. We are called to use all that he has given us, that he has caused to multiply that what we have is sufficient for the task at hand. We are called to look at the poor, the hungry, the needy with Christ's own loving eyes, to offer them bread to satisfy their hunger for the day, and their spiritual hunger for eternity. We are called to share the healing of salvation given through God our King.

AMEN