

“The Tale of Two Banquets”
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Matthew 14:13-21

As Matthew has laid out his gospel, we have had a series of parables about the Kingdom of heaven.

Jesus has been saying, “the kingdom of heaven is like a man who found a treasure, or a merchant who was in search of a great pearl.”

The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a Sower who went out to sow, or a field that was planted with wheat and weeds.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into a large shrub. That’s a bit unexpected.... Every time I hear Jesus, I expect Him to say: the Kingdom of heaven is like a small seed that grows into the cedars of Lebanon, the greatest of trees. But instead, it grows into a shrub and protects not great eagles, but small birds.

The kingdom of heaven is like some yeast. That’s also unexpected... Yeast is usually a negative example ...yeast is equated with rot generally and yet this bit of yeast fed a hundred people. It’s secret yeast that a woman had... now how could a woman be an agent for the kingdom, hiding yeast in an enormous amount of flour?

So the kingdom is not what we expect, or how we expect it; it is hidden, and is of greatest value, gladly you give up everything to obtain it – you don’t have to be told to, you just know it’s the right thing to do because no treasure is of any comparison.

This morning, our text is not a parable story, but a parable enacted. Jesus has been talking about the kingdom of heaven, but the kingdom of the world was crashing in around them.

John the Baptist was arrested by King Herod and was executed. His head was served on a platter for the amusement of the party guests.

Jesus and his disciples wanted to go to a deserted place, be alone, to consider all that had happened and what it meant.

You know those moments of pain, sadness, and disappointment.

Jesus and his disciples were no doubt praying for John's release. Several of Jesus' disciples had been disciples of John. Jesus described John as a great prophet, one like Elijah. His death, senseless, at the whim of a foolish king of this world must have been a blow to Jesus and his followers. Where was the kingdom of heaven breaking in at that moment?

Let's get away from everything for a rest, let's get away from it all for a while. But the crowd heard and as Jesus and his disciples come to shore expecting a deserted, wilderness place, a great crowd met them.

How would you react? How did Jesus react?

He had compassion on the crowd.

Jesus saw the crowd and he was moved with compassion for them, for they appeared to him as sheep without a shepherd. He went about the crowd healing the sick, laying His hands on them, touching the blind, helping the lame to stand, restoring the weak, responding to them with compassion.

The kingdom of heaven washed over the sick and weary crowd, waves of compassion, waves of grace flowed to them as Jesus ministered to them with compassion.

The hour grew late, they were out in a deserted area, "send the crowds away" said the weary, practical disciples. There was no food in the desert and no place to get food either. Everyone needed to be dismissed, head to villages so they might get food and make their way home.

"They don't need to leave – you give them something to eat."

The disciples didn't have enough, not enough for themselves, let alone the crowd. "Bring me what you have," said Jesus. Everyone sat down. Jesus took bread, blessed it broke it gave it to them and...

- their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him.
- He said "do this in remembrance of Me."
- and all ate, and all were filled.

And all the while, the disciples and the crowd were remembering another meal in the wilderness when God fed His people in the desert. For forty years they ate manna in the desert provided by God's hand.

Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them, and all ate, and all were filled. 5000 men plus the women and children ate. 12 baskets of leftovers were collected.

Herod's banquet was marked by pride, arrogance, scheming and even murder as dinner was served by the king in the royal palace. The kingdom of this world in all its vanity.

Jesus' banquet in the desert wilderness was marked by healing, truth and sharing, and all were filled, and the kingdom of heaven was glimpsed by those who shared that meal.

I titled this message "The tale of two banquets" for the contrast struck me so sharply as I reflected on this passage.

If you received two invitations for dinner, one to be with Herod at a court dinner and the other to be with Jesus' in the wilderness, which would you choose?

If you chose Herod's lavish dinner, you would have been served the greatest meal that money could buy, been waited on hand and foot, but you would have been surrounded by people posturing, everyone ready to stab you in the back for their own gain. Herod, the host would not bother with you, for you would do nothing to benefit him, he served up a meal of death.

The greatest prophet that lived was killed at the whim of a scheming woman, and a puppet monarch who wanted to save face.

Herod, his kingdom, even his killing of John the Baptist would not be remembered, except for their connection with Jesus. Nothing of that day was of note, except that it's told in connection with Jesus.

I expect Herod and his dinner party thought that they were the movers and shakers, they were where the action was happening. They were the rulers of the world, there's was the power to change and shape the world.

But the meal in the wilderness where Jesus healed all those in need, Jesus talked and encouraged and shepherded the people, He fed them the bread of life, that was where the real action was happening.

That meal is still being talked about two thousand years later.

The kingdom of God, the true kingdom, where the real power lies, looks like a crowd who began as sheep without a shepherd, who found healing and were filled at a banquet table that was spread for them in the desert.

That meal is the real party, the one that will continue on into eternity. That is the kingdom we serve, that is the party we share with everyone. That is what the kingdom of God looks like and we are invited to the feast.

Thanks be to God.