



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Don’t give up!” **Sermon on Matthew 14:13-21**

Donovan A. Drake

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Here’s the context for today’s scripture from Matthew.

John the Baptist was just murdered in the palace during the king’s birthday feast. There was music, dancing, pimento cheese sandwiches, a line at the bar, John’s head on a platter, birthday cake, and “Have you tried the egg salad?” When suffering makes no impact on the decor, that’s a bad day. But there are some in this world who notice the suffering. When Jesus heard the news about John, it made Jesus do this...

Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "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 said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

After being punched in the gut by the horrific news, what do you think Jesus was thinking? Was he outraged? Was he thinking, “How sick can people get?” Was he sad? Was his mind a carousel of slides just remembering John?

Was he full of wonder about his career path? John died because he marched up to the palace and pointed a finger at the king's sin. "Do I do the same, or is it better for me to leave the king's affairs alone? Bide my time with healing, teaching, and living a few more days?" Do you think Jesus thought, "I'm done. John's life hasn't changed a thing. Lord, take this cup from me. I GIVE UP!"

Speculate all we want, but Matthew only gives us his actions.

And, sometimes from a person's actions, you can tell what a person is thinking. Jesus got into a boat alone!

Do you understand the concept of being alone? So rare that I think it needs some explanation.

I was walking my dog on Thursday morning, rounding the corner, when I saw a woman about 20 yards away with a dog who was talking on her phone. I had never met this woman or her dog before. Her dog was tugging on her leash toward Bella. And I could see she was on the phone, so I tried to keep Bella and me on the other side of the road, but her dog was tugging her towards my dog, and she said into the phone, "My dog wants to greet another dog." And so, our dogs exchanged pleasantries in the way dogs do. She stayed on her phone talking, and I stood there, watching the dogs. And I was alone. That is what is called being alone.

It is so rare these days that with phones and ear pods, scrolling, scrolling, scrolling, one would feel alone. We are never alone!

He got into a boat... alone. There is a sound a boat makes when you step into it. He heard it. He saw the bow cut a wave. He saw the curl of the water behind the oar. He saw the placid path he left behind. A fish jumped. He felt the strain of his muscle. The sound of his labored breath... his breath, breath, breath. Rest. Heartbeat, wind. Alone. You can hear. You can see.

He set a course for alone.

Alone is different than loneliness. Loneliness is a major public health crisis in America. People suffer from loneliness, and yet they can live lives filled with crowds, traffic, family, and coworkers. I don't know if anyone says, "I want to be lonely." I think loneliness just latches on to people. It's a major health crisis in America.

It's hard to understand how the church could be dying in America when there's so much loneliness. I find it difficult to understand why the church can be so focused on fine-tuning a mission statement while people are lonely. I don't understand why the church can seem to be of no earthly good, unless the Church has never asked itself in the quietness of itself, "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "What's going on out there?"

There are congregations that used to meet. They had great music, a houseful of guests, a line at the coffee bar, while just above the donut holes, Jesus dangled from a cross! When suffering makes no impact on the decor, that's a bad day.

The church forgot who it was.

"Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." I think Jesus needed to remember who he was. Alone!

He had to listen to himself think. And as I said, we are in a culture now that seeks to run away from that. Fill it up with sound, and pictures, and people....

It's strange to be alone with your own thoughts, to think things out. Sometimes when I'm alone with my own thoughts, I get anxious. I think of things for which I have no answer. I'm trying to discipline myself to stop running to my phone for answers. That is to say, watch a cat video. After all, there's nothing a cat video can't cure."

I'm getting better at taking a breath, and saying "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." And I'm in prayer and thanking God, when I'm alone, I'm not alone.

But sometimes when I'm alone, and I'm thinking about all the stuff for which I have no answer, or the answers I have that have not worked, I have come to believe that even though I'm thinking and struggling with all that, and I'm very much alone....I'm not alone. That's just my thinking, and my struggling is in fact a prayer.

After all, the Psalmist says, "Before a word is on my tongue, O lord, you know it completely." (Psalm 139) What that sounds like is God knows our thoughts. Who are we kidding if we think we can keep anything from God? So that stuff that goes on in your brain is, strangely, a prayer. Hopefully, Paul is right that "the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." God is rooting for us, caring for us, and loving us. If we could just open our eyes, find some peace, in being alone with God.

You can't cover up how hard the world is. You can't cover it up with sound, videos, and parties. "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

I was recently with a family who has suffered loss, loss, loss, loss, boom, boom, boom, boom... four major losses. Sister, Dad, Son, Mother. Two losses tragic. And all just months apart, and after this latest loss, I met them in a room to figure out how we might celebrate another life they lost. It was clear to me that the celebration wasn't what they were feeling...they were feeling the loss. They weren't ready to celebrate.

And the son said, "I got to tell my mother before she had died, 'Mom, I do think I can be happy again.'" And that news was his mom's dying wish. A mother always hopes for her child. "Don't give up, son."

When you're alone, you have to look grief straight in the eye. Wrestle with it. Jesus withdrew to a deserted place to be by himself. Alone! And maybe to hear a still, small voice saying to him... "Don't give up, son!"

Where can I go from your presence,
Where can I flee from your Spirit?
If I go up to heaven, you are there.
If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I take wings of the morning and settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me.

The science is saying we are built to be spiritually aware, and the science is saying that the fact that we are giving up on that is killing us.

I'll quote the figures again... A high school student who says, "Yes, I turn to God for guidance in times of difficulty," is 80 percent less likely to become addicted, 75 percent less likely to have depression, 82 percent less likely to commit suicide. There's nothing else that compares. The science is in, and it is saying that we are built to be spiritually aware. We can't give up on it; we need to get into a boat...

It gives us stamina! It gives us hope!

It gives the world stamina! It gives the world hope!

When Jesus arrived at his deserted destination and found a crowd of refugees, a crowd of people who, as Matthew says, also "heard the news about John's death, they followed him to a deserted place." Alone. We gather in a sanctuary because we're hungry and thirsty for a word that is wholly different, something other.

We come to "Hear the word of God: and the crowd answers, "Our ears are open." And Jesus looked up into the heavens and took some bread and broke it and said, "This is my body broken for you." Don't give up! And they took this kind man, this giving man, placed him on a cross, and he said, "Why have you forsaken me..." Don't give up!

And they looked into a dark tomb and found it empty... and there was nothing.... Just sadness. Don't give up!

And folks heard that somehow he was alive. That darkness and despair do not have power over anything. And with hearts full of doubt, they doubted their doubts and took what little they had, except a good word, and went out to feed the world....

Taste and see that the Lord is good!

They gave it all, and when everyone was fed, they had leftovers. The good news never runs out, it never comes back empty. Don't give up!