

**“Where Do We Go From Here?”**  
**Matthew 14:10-21 and *Stone Soup* by Jon J. Muth**  
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**26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**November 13, 2016**

“This is a deserted place,” the disciples tell Jesus. Not just the physical space away from the crowds, away from people. But the space they have entered after Jesus gets the worst news you can imagine. The kind of news that you wake up to everyday wishing it was just a dream. The kind of news that leaves you sick to your stomach.

Jesus gets that kind of news – his cousin is dead at the hands of a leader. There is no jury and no judge, no higher authority he can appeal to for justice, and it’s likely that Jesus is now in danger, too.

It’s instructive to see how Jesus handles devastating news. He withdraws. He gets away from other people. Sometimes that’s a good first reaction. Give your emotions space to do what they need to do without worrying about who you might offend or who might offend you. Maybe Jesus withdraws to pray. That’s the way I usually read Jesus going off by himself, bringing his pleas and his prayers before God. But the text doesn’t make that explicit like it does in lots of other places. Maybe Jesus doesn’t feel like praying. Maybe in his anger and rage, or his fear, or his bitterness he doesn’t want to speak to or hear from holy power that has chosen not to act. Maybe the psalms with all of their courage in demanding that God show up – may those resources don’t even feel like enough.

Whatever the reason, Jesus withdraws and for those of us who believe that Jesus shows us who God is, I can’t decide whether this holy withdrawal is frightening or encouraging. It’s frightening to imagine that God sometimes looks at our world and wants nothing to do with it. That there are times that God is sickened by the state of our dysfunction, our inability to care for an earth that does not belong to us; times that God despairs at our callous politics that treats refugees as threats instead of vulnerable guests in search of safety; times when God is offended by immigrants who act as though they are indigenously entitled, while treating indigenous peoples as aliens in their own land<sup>1</sup>; times that God is insulted by a culture that treats women as objects or anyone marked other as enemy instead of fellow human being bearing the image of God.

Maybe it’s frightening that God sometimes withdraws.

Or maybe it’s encouraging. Even God takes a time out – a divine innovation: withdraw until holy anger softens into compassion for foolish children. Maybe we should all be grateful that God sometimes takes a breather, waits to speak, or act, until judgment is guided by purpose instead of raw emotion.

If that’s the case, we shouldn’t be surprised, because I know taking a breather is what’s been necessary for many of us this week. That’s what I’ve witnessed

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<sup>1</sup> The presence of American Indians in our worship today was a reminder that most people in the United States are immigrant people, non-native to this land.

anyway. Some friends of color need a time out not just from politics but from white people when the President-elect is the man endorsed by the KKK. Some gay friends just need to get away from the church, when preventing you from entering a monogamous marriage, or fearing a few transgender kids is a higher moral value for most evangelicals than condemning a man who boasts of sexually assaulting women. Some people with disabilities need to get away from our barrier-filled world when the highest officer holder in the land ridicules people like them. And as much as it pains me to admit it maybe sometimes Trump supporters in this church who say you did not vote for racism or xenophobia but for change, maybe you need a break from people like me.

Maybe it's good for everyone, including God, to withdraw. Take a break from the work, from each other. Give yourself a breather. Not engage. Not try to serve the world. Not even hope. Just hang it up for awhile. Like that village in Stone Soup – forget about happiness or meaning or anything outside of yourself. Work hard but only for yourself or your immediate family. Resign yourself to accept a community that is marked by suspicion and fear. Withdraw from community. Maybe that's what we sometimes need – not another Facebook analysis or rant, not another article explaining who's to blame for the state of our nation, not another doomsday prediction or self-satisfied celebration – just a break. A break from caring. A breather from hoping.

That's kind of seems what Jesus tries to do. He tries to get away. He tries to leave it behind. But the crowds find him. Hungry people find him. Desperate people find him. Curious people find him. Poor people find him. Rich people find him. Outsiders find him. Insiders find him. Frightened people find him. The people find him with their hunger and their need.

And Jesus doesn't turn them away. Which may just be one of the hardest things about Jesus to accept in these divided times. Jesus doesn't turn anyone away. He doesn't turn away the angry white man who did vote for Trump because he *does* fear or hate non-white people. He doesn't turn away the people who *do ridicule* people with disabilities. He doesn't turn away the people who *do want women to be silenced* in the church and the public sphere. He engages the tax collectors. He challenges the Pilates of the world. He goes to rich man's houses and to religious leaders who sell out their own people to get closer to power. He eats with them and argues with them, and demands hard things from them. Jesus doesn't turn them away. He builds relationships with people I don't like and whose views I find offensive.

But neither does he turn his back on the people who are made vulnerable by those who take power whether by the sword or by the ballot box. Jesus identifies with the poor and the oppressed. He takes sides with them. He takes sides with people of color who have testified to anyone who will listen that a Trump election makes you less safe. He takes sides with immigrants and refugees as the scriptures make crystal clear. He takes sides with those who are more vulnerable. He engages the powerful without forsaking the vulnerable. He crosses boundaries without softening God's demands. He relates to all people without accepting the injustices that some of us perpetuate.

And the church has to learn how to do both without neglecting one or the other.<sup>2</sup> That's our calling whether we voted for Trump or think he's the worst thing that ever happened to democracy. Whether we think he was elected on a platform of bigotry or fed-up change. The church has to set the table for a different kind of politic than the one we've been repeating. One where we engage people who we find offensive, even scandalous in real relationships, standing with the most vulnerable among us - personally and politically.

I'm open to hearing where Trump wants to lead us. I accept him as our President even though a significant number of his followers rejected our current President for the entire duration of his two terms.

But I'm also preparing myself to suffer with the newest immigrants in Baltimore. We have to be prepared to suffer with people of color resisting the return of Jim Crow. We have to be prepared to suffer with LGBT brothers and sisters, American Indians protecting land that they keep trying to tell us isn't ours to spoil. Regardless of how you voted, more than 200 hate-crime complaints have been lodged since the election, and we have to stand with anyone victimized by hate.<sup>3</sup> The church has to be prepared to teach and nurture and lead people – however small our numbers – to love and fight alongside Jesus.

And I know that less than a week after the election, with deep division in our land it probably seems like we don't have that much to offer. Like those people in the Stone Soup village, it's not at all clear that we've got anything to share. That the best we can do is to withdraw and stay there. I understand that desire.

It's what the disciples want Jesus to do. "Send the crowds away," they tell him. Not because they don't want to help them. Not because they don't see that it would be great if everyone could all sit down together at one big table. They want to send the crowd away because they think they've got nothing left to give. Not after what happened to John. No food left to feed a hungry people. No energy left to

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<sup>2</sup> "A mood of nativist discontent and racial scapegoating, married to actual economic displacement among a broad cross section of American society, has up to this point lacked a determinate and focused ideological articulation. It is a mood that is easily captured by a demagogue like Trump. The only way to counter this kind of capture are forms of organizing that intervene to disrupt the sense that only Trump is speaking into and giving voice to this mood. Such organizing helps *dis*-identify potential supporters from either a right wing populist like Trump, or explicitly fascist groups, through creating alternative political scripts that disarticulate the reasons for discontent from the interpretative frameworks the likes of Trump provides. But the kind of engaged, relational organizing that does not begin by denouncing people as a "basket of deplorables" requires leftists to stomach building relationships with people they don't like and find scandalous." Luke Bretherton, "How to Go On? Democratic Politics in the Age of Trump," *ABC Religion and Ethics*, 10 Nov 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/11/10/4572473.htm>

<sup>3</sup> "Post-election spate of hate crimes worse than post-9/11, experts say," Melanie Eversley, *USA Today*, November 12, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/11/12/post-election-spate-hate-crimes-worse-than-post-911-experts-say/93681294/>

engage people hungry for justice or food or safety or meaning. No resources left to listen.

But if we allow our sorrow, or our pain, or our fear, or our cynicism to convince us that disciples of Jesus have nothing to offer this divided, hungry, hurting nation then we are participating in a lie. Jesus' disciples know they have more than nothing. They know they have some food. We find that out about 10 seconds after they tell Jesus "we've got nothing." The fact is that they've got 5 loaves and 2 fish. They've got something to eat. They just don't think it's enough. Not with John's shattered body lying in the grave. Not with the brutality of power that they anticipate that is coming. Not with their own dampened spirits, weak and unsure.

They've got something, they just don't think that it is enough. The surprising thing to me is that any basic student of the Bible knows that this is the main crisis of faith of every generation. Moses liberates the people from Egypt and in the wilderness they complain there isn't enough. Elijah meets the starving widow and she's ready to die because she knows there just isn't enough. The temple falls in Jerusalem and people say they can't go on because they don't have enough. It's the main crisis of every generation of people of faith. How many people do you think told Sojourner Truth that she didn't have what was enough. Or Martin Luther King, or Susan B. Anthony, or Patrisha Wright where whose blindness did not stop her from bringing the Americans with Disabilities Act into law under a Republican President. Bayard Rustin and Harvey Milk and John Lewis and Diane Nash – I could go on and on. "Not enough" leaves lonely villages without soup, and angry, disconnected nations without a heart.

Not enough bread to go around. Not enough people of goodwill to go around. Not enough power to defeat hate. Not enough, not enough, not enough. It's the first lie first lie that robs people of their faith which is to say the courage, and the hope, and the joy that is needed and given by God in this moment in this church in this space today.

Meanwhile, Jesus demonstrates to those frightened disciples, just like Hok, Lok, and Sau, that they've got what the need among them. They've got what they need for a feast, for community, for justice and generosity, and peace – they've got it right there among themselves.

So withdraw if you need to grieve by yourself for a few hours or a few days. Go pray or rest or cry or meditate. Get away when grief overwhelms. But don't stay there too long because we've got a mission, church, and we need all hands on deck. We've got a mission to meet Jesus in the fray in relationships we're not sure we can stomach, in resistance we're not sure we've ready to for, and the church needs your gifts to make it happen. We've got a mission to keep setting a table that hosts anyone who wants to give up claims to their own life in order to receive the banquet that God is hosting, and the church needs you at the table to make it happen. We've got a mission to announce that there's a better way to live than fearing people different from you, there's a better way to govern that divide and conquer politics – and the church needs your money to make it happen. Bring your pledge next week – we just might need more bail money. We've got a mission – to join God in creating a world where there is enough.

To leave the village better off than when we found it – with people who trust each other and love each other and fight for each other just as Jesus loved us and fought for us and died for us, fueled mainly by the truth that there is enough.