

Proper 13 (A) – July 31, 2011
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX
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Matthew 14:13-21
Give

He would give one line of advice each time they got together: "We're not in Kansas anymore."

The man would give that line of advice to the new pastor of his church. The pastor was not just new to that church; he was a brand new pastor altogether, just out of seminary.

The new pastor met the man at the door of the sanctuary on that first Sunday. Smiling brightly at everyone who took his hand, the pastor wanted to give a good impression. If the truth be known, he wished for some encouraging words about his first sermon, too. However, when the man took the pastor's hand, he felt something different, not just a twinge of difference, but he felt something deep down in his gut. The man, in fact, looked different. "He was not old, but he looked older than his age. And his face was a shade of gray the pastor had never seen before."¹ The man's wife stood beside him, just off his right shoulder. But she said nothing. Because of the man's strange gray color, his wife's silence, and his own unusual feelings, the pastor bumped that family up on his visitation list. Unexpected things occur at the parish steps – that intersection between the Church and the world.

Arriving at their home the next Thursday afternoon, the wife greeted the pastor at the door. She was smartly dressed, and her appearance was perfectly accentuated by the off-white string of pearls that hugged her neck. The man, on the other hand, was dressed in gym warm-ups and leaning on a cane. After the initial pleasantries, he led the pastor out to the back porch, where they sat on adjacent chairs overlooking the lawn. Once seated, he told the young pastor that he was in the late stages of a virulent cancer.

Once he stated the fact, however, the man did not dwell on his illness. Instead he regaled the pastor with stories about their life in Washington, DC, where he had served as a highly-placed politician during most of their marriage. Here was a man who was accustomed to being in charge. Now in the grasp of cancer, he was not in charge – not by a long shot. On that note, it made some sense that at the end of their visit the man offered the pastor his hand and said, "We're not in Kansas anymore."

¹ M. Craig Barnes, "Gravesite Blessing", *Christian Century*, 35. *I thank Pastor Barnes for this poignant story that I have adorned somewhat.*

The two spent a lot of time together for the next 36 months. Truthfully, the pastor got more from the visits than the man. They spoke about heaven, the ingredients of a good life, and those things that are really important in life and those that are not. Without fail, the man would end their time together by giving the same unusual advice: “We’re not in Kansas anymore.” Finally, the pastor gathered up the courage to ask why the dying man insisted upon giving out this famous, well-worn, cinematic line.

The man with the strange gray face leaned back in his chair and mused, “Dorothy and Toto were onto something. My most extraordinary experiences have been the most frightening ones.” He then recalled the many occasions as a husband and father that he felt terribly afraid and out of control. “The scary times,” he said softly, “are when you learn the most about yourself.” Perhaps that means when you don’t feel entirely at home in your own skin, you have room to grow into your true self.

Because of that moment and the string of other moments that occurred during those 36 months, the congregation endured long pauses during the pastor’s funeral sermon. A good many did not know that the pastor – all pastors – have to fight back their own grief in order to lead the people in their grief. This is especially true when the person you are burying has given you so much. Something rich and vital had occurred within the pastor at the intersection of the gray, dying man’s life and his own.

In that same vein, we sometimes forget that Jesus sets sail to the far shore of the lake to fight with his own grief in “a deserted place” (**Matthew 14:13**). King Herod has just brutally executed his cousin John-the-Baptist in order to entertain the guests at his birthday party (**Matthew 14:1-12**). Jesus just needs to get away and grieve and cry and sort things out. But the people – throngs of people, over 5,000 people, as a matter of fact – race around the Sea of Galilee on foot and are awaiting Jesus as he steps off the boat. So much for trying to escape to the wonderful Land of Oz!

And the crowd is not leaving. Many of them are sick and others are weary from taking care of them. Even though Jesus is wrung out, he has “compassion” on the needy crowd. Bill Scheel, our Bible Study teacher, reminded us that this word “compassion” in Greek is a word connoting the intestines. Jesus’ feels something deep within his gut for those wounded, harassed people (**Matthew 14:14**).

The twelve disciples, don’t forget, are not faring much better. They desperately need some time alone with Jesus to regroup, circle the wagons, and rest. They are suffering from their own compassion fatigue. As night falls, they beg Jesus to send the crowds away, where they may find food in the neighboring towns. Jesus whirls around and

commands them, “You give them something to eat” (**Matthew 14:15-16**). The disciples try to beg off the assignment by telling Jesus that their five loaves of bread and two fish are not even enough to feed the thirteen of them.

That’s when Jesus tells all of them to sit down, while he prays over the food, breaks up the loaves and fish into pieces, and tells the disciples to give out supper. After everyone is stuffed, they took up a hundred times the amount of food they had at first (**Matthew 14:19-21**). I wish I could have seen the change erupt on the disciples’ faces – from disbelief to utter joy!

This wilderness, this “deserted place”, this place of pain, is the cross-roads where God does his best work in our lives. For those in need with nowhere else to turn, God gives sustenance in ways we never imagined. For those in charge without the resources to meet the needs in front of us, God gives us resources both outside and inside of us that we did not have before. God’s math works wonderfully both ways, and both the giver and the receiver are caught up in a miracle. That’s what happens in these painful, yet creative intersections of life.

About this intersection, another preacher said, “Christian vocation is where our greatest joy meets the world's greatest need.” There is an explosion of unmerited, unexpected, unimaginable grace in that intersection waiting for us in an unknown territory of our lives.

Let me give you an example close to home. By now most of you are familiar with the ministry started out of Saint Stephen’s – *Amigos de Jesus* – our community’s response to Hispanic day laborers and their families in this area. *Amigos’* most recent effort is to build a playground at the Garza Trailer Park where so many of the day laborers’ families live. This week in the 100 degree heat, Nancy Carney of our parish gathered the children at Garza to begin a clean-up of the area where we hope to build – should we get enough money and help to do so. After working for hours, Nancy surprised the children with popsicles. You would have thought she gave them cheesecake from *Tavern on the Green!* Of course, Nancy had bought too many and told the children they could save them and enjoy the cool treat later.

Unbeknownst to her, those children took the remaining popsicles, made up some of their own lemonade, and began selling it. Jessica, the ringleader of the effort, came to Nancy on Wednesday and reported that they had raised \$32. Jessica’s smiling face was as bright as the sun when she added, “We even sold some to “the people selling the drugs.” That’s what happens at that intersection where our greatest joy crashes into the world’s deepest pain: Drug dealers help build a children’s playground. Will we step into that intersection with those children and others?

It was six weeks after the burial of the gray-faced man that the wife asked the young pastor to accompany her out to the gravesite to see the headstone she had placed there. She took the pastor's hand and asked him to pray. He dredged up some words from his wounded heart. When he finished, she was crying and so was he. She then led him to the back side of the gravestone. Etched across the bottom of the granite were these words: "Not in Kansas anymore."