

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I don't generally spend a lot of time in big crowds of people, but there are times when crowds are unavoidable, like the crowds at airports in the holiday season, and that is where I found myself thinking about the crowds that chased after Jesus in our gospel reading this week. Now, I don't want to make too much of this comparison, because the crowds that Helen and I were in over the past few days were composed of relatively privilege folks, people who are able to pay hundreds and hundreds of dollars of their expendable income (or thousands up in first class) to fly long distances, over vast oceans and mountain ranges, in a matter of hours. Most of them seem to be on vacation, as we were. And we were all fed and watered throughout our journey. But here's where maybe an ever so slight comparison could be ventured: Our flight from Manchester in the north of England to Dublin was delayed. And we were standing in a long check-in line for much longer than usual, worried with many others that we wouldn't make our connecting flight from Dublin to Chicago. We got off about an hour late, but the layover was over two hours, so there was still a chance. Anyway, long story short, we did miss our flight to Chicago along with 120 other people on our flight, and we all had to be put up in hotels overnight by the airline, who also paid for our meals. Throughout all of this, there were several different kinds of people that were noticeable in our little crowd. There were a few who got visibly angry and also vocal with the airline personnel. It's not a good look. At the other extreme were people who were friendly with those around them in line, and who were helpful and kind and reassuring. That *is* a good look. And of course there were a lot of people who just kept quietly to themselves. All of us were in need, dependent on the airline to get us to our destination. Some were being entitled and resentful, focused only on themselves. Others were more outwardly focused, empathetic towards their fellow travelers and service personnel, making the best of an inconvenience, expecting that the airline get them what they needed.

What experiences like this can provide, if we pay attention, is a brief glimpse into the reality that is mostly hidden from us most of the time by our privileged circumstances: specifically the reality that we are not ultimately in control of our lives. There we were stuck on an island in the North Atlantic when we were supposed to be thousands of miles away at our friends' in Chicago by the end of the day, and there was simply no way for us to make that happen. A first world problem to be sure, but a momentary reality check.

The contrast between our crowd experience and the one on our Gospel reading this morning could not be starker. The crowd that followed Jesus had no illusion about being in control of their lives. They were burdened by the harsh, life-limiting realities of sickness, disease, or other ailments. These people were well aware that they were not in control of their lives. But they heard that Jesus had healed some people, and so they came, hoping against hope that they too might gain healing for themselves or their loved ones.

All of that is context for what comes next. And what doesn't. This famous story of the feeding of the five thousand is one of the rare episodes that can be found in all four Gospels. In Matthew and Luke's accounts, like in John, the crowds are following Jesus because he is a healer, and when they catch up to him, he heals them, and then comes the feeding. In Mark, though, the oldest Gospel, and the one John is probably commenting on here, there is no mention of healings, or even that that's why the crowds followed him. In Mark, Jesus sees that the crowds were like sheep without a shepherd, and he spends the day *teaching* them, not healing. And that's

what happens in John too. The need for healing gets the crowd to Jesus, but then no more mention of healing is made. Instead, this becomes a teaching moment for Jesus' disciples. And so we should not be surprised that there is also a test involved. (What would teaching be without tests?) In fact, liturgically speaking, today is for us as Jesus' latter-day disciples, the beginning of summer school. Once every three years we spend five whole weeks reading from this sixth chapter of John, so this course will take us through the end of August. And there will be some attrition along the way. Some of the auditors of the course will drop out. I'm speaking of the crowds who are with Jesus here at the beginning of the chapter, but who will be gone by the end. I hope that we, like the disciples, will stick it out to the end.

Jesus starts his teaching today with the test. This isn't the beginning of the course for the disciples, so let's say this is a sort of mid-term exam, to see what they have learned so far. The test is this: "Where are we to buy bread for all of these people to eat?" In the previous chapter, Jesus had been talking about doing the work of his father, and that he was sent to do a part of that work. So they should have that in their notes. Then, just before we get the test question, we get this bit of information: "the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near." The Passover, of course, celebrated the liberation of the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites too were once a large crowd of people led out into the wilderness, who also needed to be fed. Philip recognizes the problem, and needs to be given partial credit for his response: "no way we can *buy* food for all these people." In other words, we can't do it. We can't feed these people with the resources we have. That's a right answer, as far as it goes. It's the realization that we got a brief glimpse of when our flight was cancelled that some things are beyond our control. But the question still stands: Where will we get food? The answer is, we need help. The answer for the Israelites was that God would provide for them bread from heaven. And that is just what Jesus, working for his father, is about to do.

Andrew, though, has another response. A boy here has some bread and fish. How did he know that? I'm going to throw out a guess that the boy was like those helpful, kind, encouraging people in our airport line, who went to Andrew and said, "hey, I've got some food. Not much, but here it is." And he gave it away. I like that better than Andrew stealing some kid's lunch. But here's what I'm *not* going to say, that is sometimes said of the feeding of the five thousand, that the real miracle here is that Jesus got the crowd to share the food that they had already brought with them. There was plenty of food already, if only they would share it. We're not going to go there, because the text goes somewhere else. In the other Gospels, the disciples distribute the bread and fish to the crowd, so you can maybe imagine such mass sharing going on. But here in John, *Jesus* is the one who passes out the food. Don't think about how long that would have taken, because that's not the point.

The point of this teaching moment is that when we face up to the reality of our limitations and lack of control we can begin to recognize God as the source of what we most need and Jesus as the fulfillment of that need. That's where this course will take us over the next weeks, when we will discover that Jesus himself is the food that satisfies, that he gives himself away as bread for the life of the world, feeding us with his very self so that we become what we receive, as one of our communion hymns puts it. We who are fed with his body in word and sacrament partake of his life and become his body to likewise, in turn, be given away for the life of the world, and we become like that boy in the crowd who pipes up and says "I have life to share."

May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.