

August 2, 2026 — Sermon

Scripture Reading: Psalm 17:1–7, 15

Gospel Reading: Matthew 14:13–21

“Two Tables, Two Kingdoms”

Today, we read the story in Matthew 14 in which Jesus feeds the five thousand. But immediately before this story, Matthew tells us about another meal: King Herod’s banquet. At Herod’s banquet, John the Baptist lost his life. Warning: it is R-rated. His head was brought into the banquet hall on a platter. It is a horrifying scene.

Why does Matthew place these two stories next to each other? Matthew wants us to ask: Who is the true king? What kind of kingdom gives people genuine life, peace, and rest?

Herod’s banquet appears prosperous and abundant. Jesus’ meal takes place in a deserted place, where there seems to be almost nothing. Yet Herod’s table is filled with fear, violence, and death. Jesus’ table is filled with compassion, life, and abundance. These are two tables, and they reveal two very different kingdoms.

Herod’s banquet was held in a palace. The guests were probably people with authority, wealth, and high social standing. There was lavish food, music, dancing, and extravagance. But at the center of that feast was not love. It was power. Herod made a reckless promise in front of his guests. Even when that promise led to the death of an innocent man, Herod cared more about how he would appear before others than about doing what was right. Herod’s table was rich, but there was no compassion. It looked like a joyful feast, but beneath the celebration were fear, violence, and death. Herod sacrificed another person in order to protect his own position.

After hearing the news of John’s death, Jesus withdrew by boat to a solitary place. John the Baptist had prepared the way for Jesus and had proclaimed the coming kingdom of God. Jesus must have deeply grieved John’s death. But when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them. They were sick, hungry, tired, and in need. He reached out to those who needed help, and he healed those who were sick.

This is the difference between Herod’s reign and Jesus’ reign. Herod looked at himself. He was concerned about how people evaluated him, how his authority

appeared, and how he could protect his reputation. Jesus looked at the crowd. He saw their sickness. He saw their hunger. He saw their pain. He saw their faces. Herod used people to protect his power. Jesus used his power to care for people.

As the day passed, evening came. The disciples approached Jesus 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." Their suggestion was reasonable. There were thousands of people. It was late, and the disciples did not have enough food.

But Jesus replied, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." The disciples looked at the size of the problem and concluded that it was beyond their ability. They focused on what they lacked. But Jesus asked them to look at what they already had. They answered, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." This is all we have.

Faith does not mean that we ignore reality or refuse to calculate. Calculation can warn us of danger. It can show us how limited our resources are. It can help us make wise decisions. But faith does not allow calculation to have the final word. Sometimes we must do something not because success appears certain, but because it is right, faithful, and worth doing.

Today's psalm begins with a cry to God: "Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry." It is almost as though the psalmist is praying, "God, do not forget me. Do not turn your face away from me. See my struggle and hear my voice." Then, at the end of the psalm, the writer says, "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness." The psalmist longs to see the face of God.

And in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus shows us what the face of God looks like. The disciples saw numbers. Jesus saw faces. The disciples saw an impossible problem. Jesus saw people who should not be sent away hungry.

The psalmist prays, "God, see me." Jesus then says to his disciples, in effect, "Now you must see them." Those who seek the face of God cannot continue to turn away from the faces of their neighbors.

Mother Teresa spent much of her life caring for poor and sick people in Kolkata, India. Someone might look at the endless poverty and suffering around her and ask, "What is the point of helping one person? Can such a small act really change the world?" Mother Teresa is often remembered for comparing her work to a single drop in the ocean. What we do may seem like only one drop, but without that drop, the ocean would be less.

One meal cannot solve world hunger. But the person who receives that meal does not have to remain hungry that day. One visit cannot eliminate all loneliness. But the person being visited can know that they have not been forgotten. One prayer cannot heal every disease. But a suffering person can know that they are not alone.

We do not act only because we are certain that we can solve the entire problem. Sometimes we act because it is what love requires of us. We may not live long enough to see the fruit of every seed we plant. Perhaps our task is simply to plant the seed. Someone else may water it, and another person may eventually gather the harvest.

Christians do not plant seeds only when they are guaranteed to see the results themselves. We plant because we trust God to bring growth. We cannot feed every hungry person. We cannot heal every sick person. We cannot remove every injustice from the world.

But we can share a meal with one person. We can call someone who is lonely. We can sit beside someone who is sick. We can listen to someone who is grieving. We cannot help everyone. But we can refuse to turn away from the face God places before us today.

In a few moments, we will come to the Lord's Table. Holy Communion reminds us that we are invited to the feast of Jesus, not the feast of Herod. Herod's kingdom was based on protecting power. Jesus' kingdom is based on giving life. Herod sacrificed another person to save himself. Jesus gave himself to save others.

At this table, we remember that death did not have the final word. Violence did not have the final word. Human calculation did not have the final word. Our task is not to protect our own kingdom through power, as Herod did, but to participate in God's kingdom by giving life through love, as Jesus did.

We have been invited to the table of Jesus. And those who have been fed at the table of Jesus are sent out to feed others. Do what love requires you to do. Offer what you have. And trust God with the result. Amen.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, thank you for speaking to us through your Word. Help us to seek your face and to see the faces of those around us. Teach us to offer what we have, even when it seems small, and use it to bring compassion, hope, and life to others. Lead us away from fear and self-interest, and help us live as faithful people of your kingdom. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.