

Today's gospel reading has the weighty significance of being the only episode from Jesus' life told by all four gospel writers and the license plate of Karen Stetins' car.

Karen loves this story, and I think I have finally figured out why.

She wasn't there.

Imagine with me what it might have been like happening just a few years ago.

Bishop Paul Landahl has been spellbinding the crowds with his teaching for hours.

He stands with a microphone on the mound at US Cellular Field; he had wanted to be at Wrigley, of course, but he needed *a deserted place*...and couldn't wait till October.

Five thousand men plus women and children have flocked to this synod event...which, by the way, is the actual miracle.

The sun is setting but the charismatic teacher shows no signs of winding down.

As the crowds continue to hang and wiggle with wonder at his every word, Karen looks at her watch, tilts her head in that certain authoritative way, and gives him the stop sign.

Bishop Landahl ignores the sign and keeps going, so she has to pay a visit to the mound.

*Send the crowd away*, she says responsibly, *so that they may go into the suburbs and city, to lodge and get provisions*.

But the wise teacher with the propensity for outrageous orders looks at her and says, *You give them something to eat*.

Her response is more than a sentence, and is not suitable to be printed in Scripture.

Thankfully, the gentle bishop overlooks her insubordination, looks at her with kindness in his wise eyes, and offers a different directive.

*Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each*.

Within minutes, the crowd is divided into color-coded groups of exactly fifty each, with nametags and resource packets for everyone.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Karen Stetins, child of God, servant of Christ, over-achiever, faithful sinner and forgiven saint: there will be times in your ministry, glorious and joyful times, when you will excel and thrive, when your gifts shared with the people will shine like moonlight to the glory of God's Son.

There will be other times as well.

The demands of ministry can sometimes range from the unreasonable to the impossible.

Today the church says to you, with the authority of Christ on behalf of the crowds he loves, *You give them something to eat*, and expects you to respond, *I will, and I ask God to help me*.

It's pretty simple really, but it's not at all easy.

The people are so many, and the resources seem so few.

What was true in that ancient deserted place is true today.

The Communion into which you are being ordained is hemorrhaging from losses in mission support and worship attendance and confidence.

We are a church of fearful disciples worried that we don't have nearly enough.

We see a world around us threatened by deep hunger of every kind, by disaster and poverty and political instability as much now as it was then.

Reflective ministry retreats in deserted places get interrupted by needy crowds pressing in by cell phone, and dearly held plans are often threatened by dearly held but annoying people.

One of those people, of course, is Jesus, whose unrealistic compassion and commands are enough to make one pine for the lazy ease of seminary.

*You give them something to eat*, he says, which is a perfectly rotten thing to say to someone with high standards and a son who's a gourmet chef.

So there will be times when you fail to do what you are told.

Of course, there's another trap, too.

Notice how this story begins: with the disciples telling Jesus what to do.

That pattern repeats itself plenty in the church, and we're all guilty of it.

It's the natural, reasonable response to the conditions we see around us; the suggestion to send the crowds away makes perfect sense.

Ministry does not.

Our prayers usually begin with us telling God what to do, and thankfully, God overlooks our insubordination and looks at us with kindness in God's wise, gentle eyes.

We fail to do what Jesus tells us to do, and Jesus doesn't do what we tell him to do, either.

Yet for all our fits and starts, the story continues.

Jesus sticks with the hungry crowds and sticks with us.

He gives us new opportunities, and sometimes we get them right.

Eventually we stop counting and start sharing.

We give him whatever we have, and we take whatever word and sacrament he gives back to us and we share it with the world.

And somehow, it is enough.

It takes great courage to do this, Karen, and the church needs your leadership to help us keep taking the sacred risk.

It is frightening because we know the story--we know what happens to the bread.

After it is blessed, it is broken.

We like our loaves and fishes whole, and safe in our pantry.

We like our lives to be complete without cracks, and it is with admiration and envy that we say that someone has their lunch together.

But Jesus works with brokenness.

The heart of our faith hangs broken on the cross and is cracked open and crumbles around the table where we eat like desperate animals, with our hands, on our knees.

The story we are called to trust and live and share and incarnate is as messy as real life.

And that is why the hope is so real and the news is so good.

Karen, pastor of God, your calling and burden and joy is to share this wild, broken, beautiful hope, not only in your words, not only in your deeds, not only in your successes and in your failures, but in the whole fragmented, spinning, colorful kaleidoscope that is your life.

You are not only a disciple with a mixed track record of obedience; you are also a part of the body of Christ, a morsel of the Bread of Life.

Today you are being blessed, and you know what that means.

You will be broken.

You will be cracked open and shared by Christ with a world that needs a whole lot more than just the talented likes of you.

You will be distributed in Paulding, Ohio and God knows where else and somehow, by God's invisible and unstoppable grace, you will nourish thousands.

May your days of ordained ministry be many and joyful until that day when the miracle is at last complete, and, with all the rest of us broken pieces, you also are gathered up.