

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – August 2, 2020

Introduction

Today, Jesus continues to describe life in the Kingdom. Our church is a manifestation of the Kingdom's presence in our world, even though it is sometimes imperfect. Several things are striking about the Gospel reading. **First, the common people who come to Jesus hunger for something that is missing in their lives.** Our Lord's proclamation of the Kingdom addresses the deep-seated hunger of the crowds; so much so that they follow him without regard to their need for food. **Second, Jesus' compassion for the people over-rides the disciples' complaint that they do not have enough resources to meet the needs of the people.** But Jesus finds a way – five loaves of bread and two fish. Read today's sermon in light of our community's need, our resources, and our Lord's promises. [A personal note about the sermon: I still do not like or eat beets.]

Outdoor Worship

There will be an outdoor parking lot service this Sunday [August 2 @ 9:30 am] at Bethel Lutheran Church. There will be a fuller liturgy. However, we will not sing. The sermon to be preached then will be this sermon. Our plans will be to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Hope to see you there. Again, although inconvenient, we will wear masks and practice social distancing. This service is open to members of both congregations. Take care and be safe!

**In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve**

Gospel – Matthew 14.13-21

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him 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." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up

what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

“Come, Lord Jesus, Be Thou our Guest”

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, source of all life and giver of all blessings, we come before you this day with stomachs that are full, clothes that are clean, and homes that await us. We thank you for your gracious gifts, knowing that we neither have earned them as our wage, nor merit them as gifts. Open our eyes, O Lord, to the world around us, and help us to see the needs of our brothers and sisters. As you once commanded your disciples to feed the hungry, so now you also command us. But do not let us despair as we see the multitudes press in upon us. Give us faith, dear Jesus, to trust that our five loaves and two fishes will be sufficient to meet their needs. We ask this in your name, amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When couples get married, they are often surprised how different their ideas about day-to-day life are. Each person comes with preconceived ideas of how things will be. The old expression ‘*the devil is in the details*’ is especially true in marriage. For Vicki and me, our first major disagreement was over supper. My internship in North Dakota was over; we were married on August 15th; and we had just returned from our honeymoon in the Canadian Rockies. It was the first day of school at Luther Seminary and this would be our first meal at home in our apartment.

You need to know several things about Vicki and me. I came from a home where supper was the big meal of the day . . . generous portions of meat, potatoes, vegetables, and, of course, dessert. Vicki’s family had a different idea about supper. Lunch was bigger meal . . . Supper was much more moderate. I also discovered that the Jones family ate a broader range of vegetables than I ever did.

So the scene was set. I could smell the roast beef and I thought, ‘*This is going to be ok.*’ But there was something else I couldn’t put my finger on — a strange odor. Before I knew it, there were two piping hot beets skittering cross my white plate; leaving trails of red in their wake. As a thoughtful and sensitive new husband, I said, ‘*I don’t eat beets! . . . Just look at them: they’re red and they smell . . . I don’t like them and I never want to see them again.*’ **Well, not good.** I still don’t eat beets, but I’m a lot kinder about it. Ironically, during our quarantine, I discovered that same ‘*beety*’ smell in the house. Vicki was cooking beets because she enjoys them.

Granted, it is a silly story and Vicki and I are well beyond that minor crisis. But it illustrates how important eating together is. It's not the food so much [unless it's cooked beets], but the fellowship of eating with each other. It is no accident that the primary sacrament of the church is Holy Communion, which pre-figures the great Messianic banquet at the end of time.

That is why today's Gospel is so interesting. It's the story of people eating together in the presence of Christ. We know that this is important because the feeding of the 5000 appears in all four of the Gospels. But as is so often the case, this story pushes us farther than we care to go. *Something unique happened to a group of people who followed Jesus out into the wilderness to hear the good news of the Kingdom.* My goal is to involve you in the story; to help you think theologically. We are not going to waste our time talking about the historicity of the miracle — whether it's possible or not. Such discussions are rarely productive. *So what does the feeding of the 5000 mean for the Church? . . . Or better yet, what does this ancient story of an unexpected picnic mean for us today?*

In the verses that precede our reading, Jesus is informed that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by King Herod. His call for repentance made people uneasy; especially the King. But John would not yield. King or not, sin was sin, and it would be punished by God. And for telling the truth, the Baptist paid with his life.

When he heard the news, Jesus withdrew from the crowds. He crossed the Sea of Galilee to a lonely place on the other side. But the crowds would not relent; they followed him around the lake on foot. Even though it was late in the day, the multitude brought their sick and dying to him . . . They came, half-hoping that Jesus might make them well. And their hopes were not disappointed, Jesus had compassion on them. It was an opportunity for ministry.

But the disciples thought otherwise. *Perhaps they* were concerned about Jesus himself; *perhaps they* were tired, and wanted nothing more to do with people; **or perhaps, they thought** the crowds weren't worth Jesus' time. Whatever the case, the disciples imperiously said to Jesus, *'This is a lonely place, the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.'*

But Jesus would not allow this. Instead, he said to the disciples, **'THEY NEED NOT GO AWAY; YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT.'** *The disciples protested because they had only five loaves of bread and two fish. Such a small amount could not feed so many people. And Jesus said, 'BRING THEM HERE TO ME.'* . . . Then he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to

the crowds. After they all ate and were satisfied, they took up 12 baskets full of broken pieces. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

This story, I think, is important because it attests to the divinity of Jesus. Who else but the Son of God could feed the multitude with five loaves and two fish? Note that Matthew has no interest in how Jesus accomplished the miracle; nor do we. It's all a matter of faith; either we believe, or not. But Matthew recalls the story for another reason as well — A reason that may well prove to be as important as the obvious one. He seeks to explain the relationship of the Lord Jesus to his Church. This relationship has three dimensions.

The first dimension is the nature of Jesus himself. In the feeding of the five thousand, the first thing we notice is Jesus' compassion. His own grief over John the Baptist's death notwithstanding, Jesus ministered to the crowd. He set aside his personal sadness to heal the sick who had invaded his retreat. And when he had finished, he did not send them home as the disciples suggested. Instead, Jesus fed them with bread and fish until they were satisfied. [In the Greek, they are fed until they are 'stuffed full.']

In a world that doesn't care what happens to us, it is important to know **that Jesus does care.** But he cares more than just as a friend . . . He cares as the Lord of the Church. When he forgives our sins, we are truly forgiven. When he heals our brokenness, we are truly healed. And when he feeds us, we are truly satisfied. Matthew makes this very clear in the language that he uses to tell his story. They are not the words of a storyteller. Instead, he uses the same words that are used by the Church to describe the Last Supper. ' . . . [Jesus] took the bread, blessed, broke, and gave the loaves to the disciples.' Who, but the Lord of the Church, can satisfy his people's needs in the Sacrament, with an abundance of grace left over. As the Lord of the Church, he dies so that those who come to him might live.

The second dimension is the people who came to Jesus. They were people who needed help. Distance and empty stomachs notwithstanding, they came to Jesus because he promised salvation. Jesus was **someone** who would help them . . . **Someone** who would comfort them . . . **Someone** who would bind up their wounds . . . **Someone** to help them. **The people were desperate . . . They were helpless.** So the crowds came to Jesus because they needed something only he could give . . . They needed deliverance from the brokenness that is part of being human.

I have wondered sometimes if we are not blind to our own needs. Yes, we live in a world of abundance . . . Yes, we take pride in our strength and that fact they we do not have

to depend on anyone else . . . **And yes**, we are in control of our lives. But you see, we are not wise enough to know that the same principalities and powers, so real to Paul and to the people who came to Jesus, still oppress us today. We do not recognize them because they have different names: hatred, pride, sensuality, fear, lust, and greed. All are symptoms of sin; and left untreated, this disease always ends in death.

Matthew tells the story of the feeding so that we might see ourselves among the crowds coming to Jesus. He implores us to take a chance . . . to risk the inconvenience, and come to Jesus. He is our last resort because there is no one else to turn to. The Apostle Paul assures all who come to Jesus that ‘ . . . *neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*’

And finally, the third dimension is the Church as represented by the disciples. They are a strange bunch. Although they witnessed Jesus' great works, they still wanted to send the crowds away on an empty stomach. The disciples were either creatures of little imagination, little compassion, or little faith. It is almost comic the way they use their own meager supplies as justification to send the people away. You can just hear them explaining this to Jesus: ‘*After all, how can five loaves and two fish feed such a multitude? The crowd is simply too big. They should have planned ahead and brought their own food.*’ One can sense their amusement as they say to each other, ‘*Doesn't Jesus know anything? What more can he expect from us?*’ *All we've got is two fish and five barley loaves . . .*

But the disciples were in for a surprise. In Jesus' eyes, spiritual needs can never be met apart from physical needs. And he expects his disciples to operate the same way. They are to both minister to the spiritual needs of the crowd **and** fill their stomachs. But what Jesus commands, he also makes possible. He miraculously multiplied the bread and fish; but it was the disciples who distributed it to the hungry.

Today, we are the disciples of Jesus. And quite honestly, our resources are not adequate for the tasks set before us. The world has so many sick, hurting, hungry, and lost people that we don't even know where to start. Even if we feed some, there always seems to be more who are hungry. But nonetheless, Jesus words today are clear, ‘**GIVE YOUR FIVE THOUSAND SOMETHING TO EAT.**’ Jesus has brought this task to us . . . right to our doorstep . . . and there's no way of avoiding what we are called to do.. People are hungry.

What's more, Jesus expects us to take him at his word. Yes, our resources are small, but because we believe that Jesus is present as we do his ministry, the five fish and two loaves will be sufficient for the tasks set before us; be it teaching Sunday School, making quilts, visiting the sick, or extending the hand of friendship to those who are new in our community. I like the way Eugene Boring put it in **The New Interpreters Bible** commentary on Matthew's telling of this story. He reminds the church that *'the source of the feeding is God, but the resources are human. The work of the disciples — the bread of human effort — is honored, used, and magnified by Jesus.'* In other words, God cannot do it without us . . . Nor can we do anything without God. When a person is hungry or has no suitable place to sleep, it is a mockery of the Gospel to ask whether or not they believe in Jesus. That will come in good time. And Jesus says, **'GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT.'**

So today Jesus has invited us to a banquet; but it is unlike any picnic we've ever been to. His instructions are simple, **'BRING YOUR FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISHES.'** It is not exactly our idea of a picnic. And to make matters worse, we don't even know who else will be there because Jesus has done the inviting.

Who knows what will happen? Perhaps the five loaves and two fish will be sufficient. And I suspect that appetites long since departed, will return with a vengeance . . . For the first time in many days, people will smile and talk as they eat . . . Some will even ask for seconds and thirds. And much to our surprise, mealtime with our neighbors will prove to be an unexpected banquet . . . Something far beyond our expectations. But that's the way things are in the Kingdom. Oh, don't forget your five fish, two loaves, and the beets. **Jesus is waiting.** Amen.

