

Sermon – 9th Pentecost
Matthew 14:13-21
August 2, 2020

Fed...Not Chopped

Did you know only one of Jesus' miracles is recorded in all four gospels? It transpired on a grassy hill on the Northern shore of the Sea of Galilee at a time when Jesus' popularity - and his vulnerability - was increasing. Jesus arrived at what our story calls a "lonely place" by sea. He had crossed the lake to elude people and spend some time with his own soul, having just been swamped emotionally by something that was out of his control – the actions of powerful people.

John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin and friend, had been executed by King Herod. As Jesus himself would soon experience, when the reservoirs of human hatred are opened, even God can be swept away. Such a shattering event caused him to attempt a retreat - to think, plan, rest...and pray. But for our Lord there would be no silent retreat. We're told a swarm of the day's multitude made the journey on foot from the northwest tip of the lake to a place called Bethsaida on the sparsely populated northeast side of the sea. When he arrived – Jesus was miffed!

Well no, not really. "*He had compassion on them,*" says Matthew. Luke's version says "*he welcomed them.*" John says Jesus, ever the host – saw the crowd and immediately wondered about supper. The gospel of Mark even supplies a reason for the concern of our Lord, saying, "*because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*" That phrase means "the crowd," a metaphor for us all - didn't know what to do – they were "directionless". If there is a silver lining in what they did – chasing Jesus down at all hours on empty stomachs, an accidental blessing if I may use that phrase – it's that at least when in doubt they followed Jesus. How many people in this world don't – or can't simply because they don't know him? And, as Matthew tells us, when Jesus needed direction, he "looked to heaven" - talked to his Father – the crowd's God. Does it not stand to reason then, that when in need or doubt, Jesus is a good person to talk too?

The issue of food comes up, as it does daily for everybody, but it may as well have been a roof over their heads. For no small number Matthew says, it was their health. Mark's version says for others it was going deeper into what Jesus had been teaching when he left them earlier in the day. And the numbers of affected people...overwhelming! Where do you begin? '*Send them away*', suggested a disciple. Well, at least it was a plan. '*Buy them dinner*', was God's. Lesson alert - provide for others and in the process provide for yourself. Fill need - and fill your soul.

You see, the first and perhaps not even foremost evidence of God in this story isn't the multiplying of bread but the showing of compassion. Compassion is wonderful sentiment – but the disciple's plan to send folks home reveals how it not always practical and very often pricey. John's version of this story says the disciples did some quick math and determined it would cost eight months' wages. Such is human vision – now let's take a gander at God's vision. Luke records Jesus saying; "*Have the people sit down in groups of fifty.*" Even Matthew's brief instructions "*bring the loaves and fish to me*" calls for no action on the crowd's part - no "*get them on their knees for prayer and confession.*" It says '*you organize them, I will energize them*'. *You obey...I'll supply.*

Philip Yancey, in his book *“The Jesus I Never Knew”* said *“Unavoidably, we moderns read Jesus' life backwards, knowing how it turns out. That day no one, but Jesus, had a clue. In the wilderness, Satan had dangled before Jesus the prospects of power through splashy miracles. Now, not to gain power or prestige but to merely shore up a basic human need, to settle stomachs and anxious minds, Jesus took two salted fish, five small loaves of bread and performed the miracle everyone was waiting for but no one had a clue how it would come about. In the face of overwhelming need and apparently underwhelming resources, God in Jesus Christ provided”*.

Three of the Gospels leave it at that. *“They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of broken pieces of bread and fish,”* Only John tells what happened next. Jesus got his time alone, at last. And as the disciples rowed back across the lake, fighting a storm all the way, putting their backs into the oars just as they had put their hands to the evening distribution, Jesus spent the night alone in prayer. Do you have any doubt that those very same straining disciples were the subject of those prayers? Do you have any doubt you - straining, fretting person that you are - are the subject of His current ones?

Though we Lutherans espouse a *“theology of the cross”*, and rightfully so, with its images and message of seeing God most clearly in suffering and abandonment, we do well to remember what might be called the Bible's other major lesson for us - *“theology of blessing and abundance.”* Yes, the reality is we more clearly see our need for God from our times and places of isolation or fear, like now. Even Jesus took time to go *“to a lonely place by himself”*. Solitude for many may be unwelcome, but for the soul it's not unimportant. So how do we reconcile a humbling theology of the cross with a vigorous, dare we say *“triumphant”* theology of abundance?

Carefully, but with eyes front and center on Christ, the supplier of both. The narrative of this story is that before we enjoy and rejoice in the abundance given to us from God through Christ, we need some time in *“sparse places – lonely places.”* Before we view the world in its fullest colors of blessing, we are invited, and not occasionally taken, often with little notice... to the gray monotones of suffering. I'm not going to call the present sufferings anything but unwelcome. I recently heard it described as *“the perfect storm”* of an incurable virus, wearisome physical isolation, worrisome economic deprivation, renewed and difficult questions about race, and oh...a national election pitting two parties that seem to have replaced something once called *“common ground”* with something akin to *“no man's land”* – venture at your own political risk. Where do you mine for compassion these days among citizens beset by the rage of a *“cancel culture”* or for whom compromise is treason?”

Golly, now is precisely the time to see what we have in Christ. Now is time to offer what we have in Christ. Now it is time be one of the crowd - opening our hands to receive the abundance of God's compassion and provision. Now it is time to be one of the disciples through whose hands God extends compassion and provides. I leave it to you to determine which category you best fall in. If you are looking for a way to pass a loaf or a fish -do it today. Consider any of our congregation's missions of the month. There is not a one of them that has seen the needle on need go anyplace but up. Find another one - make a call and be part of the compassion. Strain and sacrifice to offer it if you will – but be not surprised if the measure you give is not matched by the measure you receive - God in Jesus supplying for you – released resources make full souls.

'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish'. That is the response of the ages when people feel overwhelmed by the world around them. It is the response of folks with little time on their hands because of this pandemic or way too much. It is the response of the business owner whose customers have chosen to or have to stay away, the landlord whose tenants have fled or look ready to, the employee sitting pretty in a booming economy a few months ago now hearing *"its gonna be a slow recovery"*. *"Nothing here but five loaves and two fish"* – and what is that among so great a need? Well - plenty if it is given over to Jesus. Like the hungry in our text, or skeptical distributing disciples, I don't know how it will be enough. But, as Philip Yancey pointed out, we live on the other side of this story, the *"they all ate and were satisfied side"*, the *"they took up twelve baskets of broken pieces side"*, we'll call it *"the resurrection of Jesus side"* of the story. Today, that is enough – it's actually much more than enough. AMEN