

Two Meals and a Multitude to Feed

Time after Pentecost, Lectionary 18
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21;
Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Almost 2000 years ago a group of people walked around the shores of the Sea of Galilee to sit at Jesus' feet. Food was not a priority. But they knew why they were coming, for their hunger was for the word of God.

Who knows how far or for how long they had walked, but, at least they sat at Jesus' feet, in His presence, listening to His life giving word and receiving His healing. He Himself hungered and sought healing that day. Oh, not for food, but for comfort and solace. He had just heard of the death of His cousin, John the Baptist, who was served at another meal. A great royal banquet with best of fare and the most engaging entertainment. Yet in the midst of the greatest abundance in the land, political maneuvering took pride of place. When you get home, you might want to read the story for yourself; it's the preceding verses in the same chapter of the gospel.

At that grand meal, fear ruled and received its crowning glory in the birthday gift Herod gave to his seductive, dancing daughter. It was a gift that struck fear in the hearts of those gathered as guests at the banquet, for the heart terrifying royal gift was the head of John the Baptist, served up on the finest of royal platters. Warning – beware those who dare to utter truthful criticism against those in authority and power. And what of us, beloved? At which table will we choose to take our place?

Jesus' appeal for the people had reached celebrity status. People were following Him everywhere around Galilee listening, hoping, wanting to be healed. They were relentless, tracking Jesus down at every opportunity. Given Herod's fear-filled power and Jesus' popularity, little wonder that Herod feared Jesus might in fact be John raised from the dead. And though Jesus might have fled to a deserted place, what he'd done was withdrawn for that place became, in no time at all, filled with a pressing throng. In contrast to Herod's hostile hospitality, Jesus is moved to compassion for the crowd that attends Him, for He sees right to heart of their need. Despite His grief, and realizing the great threat posed by Herod and the authorities, Jesus sets about His ministry, healing the sick the crowd had brought to Him. The compassion of the meal to follow is drawn in sharp contrast to the banquet before it. In no time at all the day drew to a close and the disciples were ready to disperse the crowd and settle down for the night. They suggest to Jesus that the people be sent off to find whatever food and rest they might in nearby villages. But Jesus will have none of it. His response stuns them: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." How, they exclaim, can they feed so many with what they have – five loaves and two fish? Feed five thousand with only five loaves of bread and two fish? It's impossible!

Today we face the overwhelming task of providing food for a hungry world. Here we are, with the bounty of the world's food supply ours for the buying. Do you remember the ten young men from the Sudan that we helped get started in a new life here? They were taken to a local supermarket and were astounded at vast displays of food from all over the world. But they were perplexed – How could there be so much food when there were no farms? When they left the store all they could see was an asphalt parking lot and houses and the road and traffic. Where, they asked, did all the food in the store come from? And we smiled and chuckled for we had never walked through barren, parched land, nor had we ever celebrated the miraculous bounty of a meager bowl of rice and a cup of clean water. For we, beloved, live in a vast oasis amidst the desert of the world's hungry and our dismay is the dismay of the disciples.

What do we have? What can we possibly do to address the hungry at home and abroad? In a flash, we are thinking as the disciples thought, out of scarcity – there just isn't enough. Such thinking is not bad or terrible; we're not wicked because we think that way. It was the disciples' and it's our natural response in the face of what appears to be an absolutely impossible task. The disciples act logically and practically, what they have is nowhere near enough. But Jesus, much to their surprise – and to ours – is calling for the application of abundance. Jesus says to them what he says to us, "Bring Me what you have." And what does Jesus do? He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves and the two fish and looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

Like the crowd that followed Jesus, we too have followed Him, today, to this place. We have come here with all our hungers, with all our needs, with our sorrows and sufferings, with our failures and defeats, with our need for His forgives, and our need for His assurance that we are beloved by God; to be told once again that we need not be afraid of death for the gift of life is ours, now and hereafter, not because we deserve it, not because we earned it, but because God in His unconditional love has given it to us.

Just as Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the loaves and fish, we will come to a table where the self same actions will occur again. What an astounding meal, a wafer of bread and a sip of wine. Yet all who have received it know themselves healed and forgiven once again. How can it be that so little can accomplish so much?

A pastor at a church that used loaves of bread for Holy Communion was used to pulling off small portions of each loaf to give to those receiving communion. Such small portions helped the loaf stretch for the large number in his congregation and were bite size for the comfort of the people receiving them. One Sunday, a tiny three year old girl stood before him and he gave her the bread. As He did so he knelt down and said to her, "This bread means that Jesus loves you very much." The little girl finished her morsel but didn't move away. She stood there with her hands outstretched the way she had been taught. She looked up at the Pastor with hope filled eyes and asked, "More?"

More? With God there is always more, more forgiveness, more compassion, more love. God, you see, takes the smallest things we can offer and turns them into something so great that we

can't even begin to grasp the full, enormous significance of it. We need to move from the morsel of scarcity, to the great chunk of abundance.

And there we are, beloved. A special envelope in the bulletin insert is waiting to receive what we have to give. And some tables of baked bread waiting in the gathering space for us to purchase. No matter how you look at it, this is not even a drop in the bucket in the face of world hunger. Nevertheless Christ says to us, "Bring me what you have."

"But we don't have near enough!" we want to cry. "Bring me what you have," is what He says. You see, He will do the feeding. All He asks of us is that we provide the resources. He will gladly accept what we have to offer and multiply it to meet the need. For if he can feed five thousand with five small loaves and two fish, just imagine what He can do with what you and I give Him today.

Amen.