

August 6, 2017  
Pentecost 9  
Enough for Everyone  
Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21  
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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.  
Gracia y paz del Dios, Padre, Hijo e Espíritu Santo.  
Grace and peace from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Stories of Jesus feeding huge crowds were an important part of the traditions of Jesus' early followers.

Matthew includes two feeding stories: this one and the feeding of 4,000 in chapter 15. Mark recounts these two stories in chapter 6 and 8. Luke 9 and John 6 include the "feeding of the five thousand" Miraculous feeding stories in the gospels echo a common theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. Manna sustained the Israelites in the wilderness of the Exodus. The prophet Isaiah invites everyone to an abundant feast where food and drink are free. The widow of Zarephath shared what little she had with Elijah and her grain and oil did not run out. Elisha fed one hundred hungry people in the wilderness.

Jesus' table ritual remains a common practice at modern Jewish tables. It is the same ritual we hear in the gospel accounts of the Passover meal he shared on the night he was betrayed. It is the same ritual we hear at this table. Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it.

"The feeding of the five thousand", according to Matthew follows the grisly account of John the Baptist's death, at the hands of Herod. In contrast to the simple meal Jesus served to the multitude Herod's meal was extravagant, sumptuous and marked by debauchery. He threw himself a birthday bash to which an elite few were invited. His step-daughter danced for the men at the tables. She danced so beautifully that Herod publicly promised her anything she wanted. Herodias, Herod's wife demanded that her daughter ask for the head of John the Baptizer – on a platter. Because Herod made the promise to the young Herodias publicly, he had no choice but to execute John the Baptizer.

When Jesus heard of the death of his cousin he went off by himself to pray into "a deserted place" or, from the Greek: "wilderness". The word "Wilderness" ought to evoke powerful biblical images. Wilderness is a barren place. Lonely, deserted, uninhabitable, and desolate, literally and metaphorically.

John the Baptizer preached repentance in the wilderness. He prepared the way for Messiah, Jesus, who was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, immediately following his baptism, to fast and be tested in preparation for his ministry.

Wilderness time can be long and it can be brief, forty days or forty years, even just 40 minutes. Wilderness can be a frightening place and wilderness can be a place of restoration. A place to grieve, pray, repent, and fast, where God is not absent. Jesus' often withdraws to the solitude of wilderness to recharge. This time, his retreat is cut short by the great crowds who followed him there.

We are so familiar with this story that it may have lost its capacity to astonish us. Following a long day filled with compassion and healing, the disciples realize it's time to eat. "Send the crowds away so they can buy food for themselves".

As usual Jesus has another idea: Don't send them away! You feed them! With what? This measly five loaves and two fish! That's barely enough for US! That's fine, Jesus says. He gave thanks, blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples.

The disciples fed the crowd, five thousand men, plus women and children. Picture a Portland Trailblazer game – 20,000 or so people – yes, that many. AND! Everyone had enough to eat, MORE than enough, they gathered abundant leftovers.

Imagine the logistics involved in distributing the food, and gathering up the leftovers, but we KNOW that no one left hungry.

I wonder if the "miracle" we witness is not so much what Jesus does as what happens among the crowd in the presence of Jesus' compassion. Do you imagine that the crowds experienced the transformative power of Christ's presence when he invited them to make themselves comfortable on the grass, as honored guests at a feast?

How do you experience Jesus inviting YOU to come to this Eucharistic meal, an honored guest at the banquet of the Savior? Can you visualize Jesus as he takes the bread, gives thanks to God, breaks it and gives it . . . TO YOU?

While we focus on the miracle of multiplication perhaps the more profound action of the story is that Jesus pushes the disciples to imagine ridiculous possibilities. Possibilities for finding and distributing food to all who are hungry. Possibilities for trusting Jesus beyond their imaginations.

In his book *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*, Richard S. Swanson writes, "This scene in the wilderness is not just a scene about hunger and nourishment. And it's not just a scene about providing food for the hungry."

The images we encounter in this familiar feeding story are present-tense. They open us to the transformative power of Christ in our lives when WE break bread together at this table and in our community. Sharing a meal is a primary means of creating and maintaining community. It is a sacramental act that echoes through scriptures and across the centuries. In this sacred meal Christ satisfies our deepest hungers, heals our brokenness, and binds us together as one body.

We must remember, though that the body of Christ cannot be contained within these walls or limited to this community. We don't come to church just to be fed. We participate in the life of the church to be formed. Here in this place the old saying is true "you are what you eat". It is here around the Lord's Table, here in the practice of communal prayer, that we move from being one of the crowd, receiving the bread of life, to being one of the disciples receiving the command to feed the masses, to change the world. We do that, sisters and brothers, by giving what little we have, what little we are to God to use for the good of God's creation.

There were abundant leftovers in that deserted place. We don't know what the disciples did with the leftovers. How they used the abundance that Jesus provided. How are we to use our leftovers?

There are millions of people in the United States who live in food deserts, neighborhoods or communities where it is difficult or sometimes impossible to access a fully stocked grocery store. Millions of inner city and rural families, single adults, and aging widows daily live with uncertainty about what they will eat or IF they will eat, either because they do not have access to plentiful food choices or they do not have financial resources to buy food.

We are Jesus' disciples today! How often do we say by word or action, "Jesus send them into the villages so that they can find food". And Jesus says to us "they don't need to go away. You feed them!"

Many of us squirm under that command, – I know, I do! "With what, Jesus", we ask. And Jesus tells us "use what you have and feed them".

I don't have the answer to ending hunger in this country and around the world. Besides, there are foundations, organizations and individuals who have dedicated their resources, time and talents to work toward ending hunger and lack of resources. Actor Jeff Bridges has been working to eliminate childhood hunger for more than 30 years. In the early 1980s, he founded the End Hunger Network, an organization focused on feeding children around the world. More recently, he has focused on feeding kids in the United States.

Faced with the reality that more than 16 million American kids live in households that are designated “food insecure” –where it is uncertain where their next meal will come from, or if it will come at all, Bridges remains optimistic that hunger can and WILL be eliminated in this country.

We may not have the clout or the money of a Jeff Bridges AND we can find ways, here in this community to see to it that no one goes hungry. Yet, God calls us to share this most basic staple of human existence, bread. God commands us to give it away for free to whoever asks for it.

This fall, we will do as Jesus commanded the disciples in today’s gospel “you feed them”. Plans are in the works for a twice monthly community meal prepared by a professional chef in this church’s kitchen. Stayed tuned for ways that you can be involved. In the meantime, pay attention to the closing dialogue we recite every Sunday? It is more than a catchy little phrase to end our liturgy.

When you say it MEAN it. When you leave here LIVE it.

Go in peace to LOVE AND SERVE THE LORD. And the people say:

Thanks be to God!