

Sermon for Sunday, August 2, 2020 - "The Feeding of the 5000"

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Pastor Marion Pruitt-Jefferson, Preacher

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

Beloved of God, Grace to you and Peace from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The feeding of the 5000 is one of the best known of Jesus' miracles and it's the only miracle that's recorded in all four of the gospels, which tells us something about the importance of this story. Since the beginning, the church has understood the Feeding of the 5000 to be about the sacrament of Holy Communion. Jesus' feeding the multitude points us to the deeper reality of how Jesus continues to feed us today – in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

So, there is an obvious problem with our hearing of this story today. What can we say about the feeding of the 5000 when we can't experience Jesus' feeding us here at this table today - when we can't hear the invitation to "Take and Eat" and taste the bread which is Christ's very life given for us?

About six weeks after we went into lockdown due to the pandemic, I was saying to my husband, John, how much I missed going to church, being together with everyone in this place, singing and praying together and especially sharing in Holy Communion. John said, "Well, you're a pastor, why not just have communion here at home? We have bread and wine, you know the right words to say, what else do we need?"

I thought about that for a bit. Technically, John was right. We did have bread and wine, and as a pastor in the Lutheran Church, I do have the privilege of presiding at Holy Communion. We could do it. But somehow, the idea of us having our own little private communion at home felt a bit off. It just seemed somehow incomplete – like something important would be missing. And then it came to me. For this meal we call Holy Communion to be the fullest expression of God's love and grace and mercy, it needs the **Holy Community** – all of us sharing together in the gifts of bread and wine, Christ's body and blood, given not just for me or for you, but for us.

And that's really hard for us right now. Our **Holy Community** is living in a kind of exile. We have been separated from one another, from this beautiful gathering place, from the regular pattern of receiving Holy Communion, from the joy of singing and praying together, and even from sharing the "little sacrament" of fellowship with one another over a cup of coffee and cookies. And I miss all of this so much – and I know you do as well.

The children of Israel knew a lot about what it felt like to be exiled from their place of worship, to be separated from their community, even to wonder if God had forgotten them. For 75 years they were held captive in Babylon against their will. They longed for that day when they would

be able to return home, to rebuild the temple, and gather once again as God's holy people for worship. To sustain them during their exile, God sent them the prophet Isaiah who reminds them with beautiful and powerful words that God was still with them, still planning for them an abundant, hope-filled future.

The passage we heard a moment ago from Isaiah 55 is part of a larger section of Isaiah that begins at chapter 40. This middle section of Isaiah, sometimes called "Second Isaiah", is just brimming with the promises of God – promises that renewed the people's hope that indeed, the day was surely coming when God would deliver them from exile and bring them home. There are so many well-known and beloved verses of scripture in these 15 chapters of "Second Isaiah" - verses like these: *Comfort, O comfort my people says your God ... Get you up to a high mountain O Zion, herald of good tidings. God will feed his flock like a Shepherd and he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom ... Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old, for I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

There is SO much beauty and hope and good news in Second Isaiah you can hardly take it all in. Finally, in Chapter 55 we hear God say: Listen up people – everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come buy and eat! I'm putting on a great feast and everyone is invited. Come over here and eat what is good – bread and wine and milk – and delight yourself in rich food! Incline your ear and Listen to me and feast on the good food of my Word.

These words and so many like them sustained God's people during their exile; and these same promises sustain us yet today. While we still have to remain at home, not knowing when our separation from this place of worship and from one another will end, God speaks to us and says: I am doing a new thing! Don't you see? I am making a way through the wilderness of the pandemic. I am with you and will feed you with words of hope and promise.

God always finds a way to us, even in these days of physical distancing and the necessary disruption in our in-person worship. God can take the words of a prophet and restore hope to people living in exile for nearly two generations. God in Christ can take a mere five loaves and two fish and transform it into a meal that feeds thousands. And in these days when we cannot be with one another for worship in this space, God takes what we have – a camera, computer technology, the internet, YouTube, and the labor of skilled hands - and through those means, God creates a new kind of Holy Community and feeds us with grace and mercy.

On Sunday mornings when we open that email message from Pr. Amy and hover our cursor over the "click here" link, instantly we are transported to the Good Shepherd YouTube channel. We can say hello to one another on the Chat page and then, after watching that strange little countdown with the mildly annoying electronic music, suddenly we're here. We can see our beautiful sanctuary and our dear Pr. Amy standing in this spot, smiling and greeting us in the name of Jesus. And while we recognize the limits of this kind of togetherness, we also know that because of the wonders of the internet God can use this technology to reach beyond the bounds of time and space to bring comfort, encouragement and hope to people anywhere. And in that moment our Holy Community is no longer limited to this physical location, but can draw in people from across town, across the state, even across the country.

And so, we can be together to hear God's Word, sing hymns of faith, receive grace and encouragement through Pr. Amy's faithful preaching, pray for the needs of the world, even give our offerings. It is not all that we would hope for; but by God's grace it is enough to sustain us. And I can tell you, when the last notes of Brooke's postlude fade away and my computer screen goes dark, I don't want to let go of that connection that's been created. I don't want to leave that virtual space where God is at work gathering this Holy Community and feeding us in Word, Song, Prayer, and in our virtual presence with one another.

I am so thankful for these gifts and for the continuity of our Sunday morning gathering. And I'm even more grateful that next week, after that computer screen goes dark, we can get in our cars, or on our bikes, or on our feet and make our way here – well, out there. We'll be able to gather in what Reg Laursen has called "The Cathedral of Spilde Woods" to be fed not only with the Word, but also with the bread and wine of Holy Communion. This Holy Community - physically distanced and masked, but together - will receive the gifts of Christ's body and blood given for us and for all the world.