

You Feed Them
Matthew 14:13-21
August 6, 2017 – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Friends, I've said on numerous occasions that I've never known this church to run out of food. It's been said that whenever Methodists come together they do two things: they take an offering and they eat. I'll leave the call to take an offering for another sermon; but the eating is hugely important because table fellowship builds relationship. This is very true today, and it was even truer in Jesus' time. If one wanted to be in a caring, sharing, loving relationship with one's friends, one would dine with them; and one would only dine with those with whom one desired a relationship. And so, we have these wonderful feeding stories of Jesus.

The feeding of the five thousand. . . I note that, while we call it the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew tells us there were five thousand men, plus women and children, probably closer to ten thousand. But the number matters not. People who want to find a certain literalness in the Bible and still don't want to believe that bread miraculously materialized out of nowhere have attempted to explain the feeding. The most common explanation is that, during the first century, most people would not have come together without some food in their pack, so they see this story a "sort of" the church's first potluck dinner. But in my mind, this story is far too rich to reduce it to a simply question of where the food came from.

The first thing we note in the story is that Jesus originally wanted to be alone. We're told that he withdrew to a place by himself, but the crowd followed him. Still, he didn't chase them away. No, he had compassion on them, and he healed their sick. And then. . . Then, as it was getting late, the disciples suggested that folks should be sent away to get their supper. But Jesus wants to be in relationship, so what does he tell his disciples? "They need not go away. You feed them." The disciples response: "We don't have much to eat. We don't have much to offer." But Jesus says, "Yes you do!" Now, don't miss this sequence. Jesus takes the bread; blesses it; breaks it; gives it to the disciples; and they give it to the crowd, and all were satisfied. Satisfied because they had a huge dinner? I don't know. But I know they were satisfied because they had come into a relationship with Jesus Christ. They were satisfied because they had experienced the love of God.

The feeding of the five thousand is important from a biblical standpoint. It's one of the few stories of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels, and it appears twice in Matthew and Mark. (The second time it's only four thousand that are fed.) Matthew probably included it twice because his predecessor, Mark, did; but why would Mark including it twice? Simply to be redundant? – that's not Mark's way. No, Mark included it twice, because Mark established a pattern of Jesus performing miracles on both sides of the Sea of Galilee, the Jewish side and the Gentile side. In Mark, what Jesus does for the Jews, Jesus also does for the Gentiles. Thus, Mark establishes a pattern of inclusiveness. Jesus is the Christ for both the Jews and the Gentiles. Jesus feeds all people, and all means all.

There's another feeding story in all four Gospels (although in a slightly different contexts in John's Gospel), and that's the story of the Last Supper – the sacrament which we are celebrating today. Here we read that, on that night when Jesus had his last meal with his disciples, “as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples.”(Matt 26:26) Does that sequence sound familiar? “Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples.” Friends, Jesus still wants to be in relationship, and that's what this meal is all about – being in loving relationship, I might even say being in communion with Jesus Christ. This meal is about sharing table fellowship with each other and with Christ. This simple piece of bread and small cup of juice is the richest meal that you will ever have, because in this meal we receive the love of God as in no other; and all who come to this meal with open hearts will be satisfied.

There is one other feeding story that I think important for our consideration; and this one appears only in the Gospel of Luke. We heard about it the Sunday after Easter. Here the resurrected Christ appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and strikes up a friendship with them, and they invite him to dinner; they invite him to share in table fellowship. That alone is key – they open their hearts and minds to a new relationship. And when Jesus was at the table, he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them.(Luke 24:30) There's the sequence again – Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread. And when Jesus gave the bread to the disciples, their eyes were open to the wonders of God's amazing love and the miracle of resurrected life; and they immediately went forth to spread the good news that Christ is alive. That's what this meal is all about – the good news of God's amazing life and the wonder of resurrected life in Christ.

Three meals in our Bible, all of them an invitation to be in relationship with Jesus Christ.

When you visit the Holy Land today, there's a chapel at the place that tradition tells us the feeding of the five thousand took place. And there's a famous sixth century mosaic in the floor of the chancel, right in front of the altar. In that mosaic there are two fish, and a basket of bread; but in the basket there are only four loaves of bread. And, of course, the question has been raised through the centuries: “Why only four loaves of bread? The Gospels tell us there were five.” The answer that is traditionally given is: “The fifth loaf is on the altar.” Every time we celebrate communion, we join the 5000. Every time we celebrate communion with join with all the people through the millennia that have shared in this meal. Every time we celebrate communion we recognize that, in a spiritual sense, once again, Christ takes bread, blesses it, breaks is, and gives it to his followers so they may give it to all the world.

Thanks be to God for this meal of life and love. Amen.

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