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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Proper 13, Series A (Pentecost 9)  
Saturday, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
Sunday, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Sermon: Blessing Bread**  
**Text: Matthew 14:13-21**

Focus: Our compassionate Lord gives us more than we need!  
Function: That they would give generously to the mission of God's Church.  
Structure: Story-Interrupted  
Locus: "[God] richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.... For all this, it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him" (SC, 1<sup>st</sup> Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. The feeding of the five thousand is one of Jesus' most significant acts, for it is the only miracle story that occurs in all four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Each gospel writer conveys varying levels of detail (for example, John alone mentions that a little boy brought the fish and loaves), yet all of them give the same basic information: it happened by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus started with just five loaves and two fish, there were over 5,000 people present in the crowd, and they ended up with more than 12 baskets full of leftovers.

Matthew begins by telling us Jesus was trying to *get away* from the crowds (Matt. 14:13). He had just received the terrible news about the death of John the Baptist, a holy prophet and Jesus' own forerunner (v. 12). John died at the whim of a dancing girl and her incestuous stepfather, beheaded as a martyr (Matthew 14:1-12). But John was more than just Jesus' colleague. He was also his second cousin, the son of his mother Mary's cousin Elizabeth. And when Jesus heard that John was dead, he was probably stricken with grief, as any of us would be at a close relative's death. Jesus wanted to be alone and set out in a boat by himself. Sometimes

when you are sad, it's hard to be around people pressing in with their problems and expectations. All you want to do is crawl into a hole and be alone with your grief.

But the crowds caught wind of Jesus' destination and followed him on foot. And, Matthew tells us, even though Jesus was tired and lonely and full of sorrow, he could not ignore the neediness of the crowds. "He had compassion on them" (v. 14). The verb Matthew uses is that special verb I mentioned a few months ago: *splagchnidzomai*. Recall that *splagchnidzomai* refers to that gut-wrenching, intestinal twisting pity that moves someone to action on behalf of someone else. So when Jesus saw the crowds of hopeless, helpless people with broken hearts and broken bones, he could not ignore them.

More and more we understand the phenomenon known as "compassion fatigue." Compassion fatigue is the exhaustion and depression that many caregivers experience when they carry the burdens and worries of other people for too long. Doctors, nurses, therapists, counselors, and pastors are all susceptible to burnout or cynicism if they do not take a break from the problems of others. That is one reason why it's essential for me to guard my days off and vacation time. Without Sabbath for rest and refreshment, I would quickly be of no use to anybody.

Jesus, of course, knew this. Of all people, more demands were placed on him than any other human being who ever lived. And even though he is the divine Son of God, Jesus is also a human being who needed rest. He is fully God *and fully human*. That's why he often tried to get away from the crowds and sometimes told people "no" and turned them away (Mark 1:35-38; Matt. 13:58).

But not on this occasion! No, Jesus had compassion on the crowds and healed them until evening came.

Then the ever-so-practical disciples recognized that it was time for supper, and the day's work was done, but there was no food. "This is a desolate place," complained the disciples, trying to be heard above their grumbling tummies. "The day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves" (Matt. 14:15). The hungry people were a problem, and the disciples didn't want to deal with them—perhaps *couldn't* deal with them. Perhaps with a care for Jesus' much needed rest, they urged him to send the crowd away.

But Jesus said, "No need for that! Instead, *you* guys give them something to eat!"

It was a startling command. Perhaps, at first, the disciples thought Jesus was joking. But when he didn't laugh, they knew he was serious. But it was an insane request.

"But we only have five loaves of bread and two fish," they replied. Surely, that would not feed a crowd of over 5,000 men, women, and children! That wasn't even enough food for Jesus and the twelve apostles, let alone the rest of the people. What was Jesus on, anyway?!

See, the disciples were struggling with the same lack of faith that many of us have. They operated from a scarcity mentality. They didn't even need to know long division to figure out that five loaves among five thousand plus people was no more than a crumb. And like many people faced with limited resources, they probably wanted to keep the scant morsels for themselves. Better to send the crowds packing than to share what impossibly little they had.

Unfortunately, the same scarcity mentality gets in the way of ministry in the Church even today. Some people are so overwhelmed by the world's problems—poverty, hunger, human trafficking, abortion—that they just decide to do nothing at all. It's not that they don't care, it's just that they are paralyzed by fear and doubt. They feel too small and insignificant to make a meaningful impact, so they just do nothing. That even happens on a congregational level. People don't think their own pockets are very full, and so when the offering plate comes around,

they figure their little offering won't make much of a difference anyway, and they don't give *anything*. The little they have they hold onto, and in the process, the church struggles to meet its budget and carry out its ministry and mission.

But Jesus operates neither from a scarcity mentality nor from a lack of faith. He knows that God is our loving, heavenly Father who loves to give his children gifts (cf. Jas. 1:17). He knows that when we honor the Lord with our first fruits and bring the whole tithe into the Lord's house, God will pour out so much blessing on us that we don't even know what to do with it (Mal. 3:10). "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps. 34:8).

So Jesus says, "Bring me the bread and fish," and after they do, he takes the bread and fish, looks at the sky, blesses them, breaks them, and gives them to the disciples. Now, there is a special pattern here. Listen to the exact words of Matthew:

"Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds" (Matt. 14:19).

I don't know if you caught it, but there are echoes—or overtures—to Jesus' words of institution at the Last Supper when Jesus first celebrated Holy Communion: "Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body'" (Matt. 26:26). It would be incorrect, of course, to suggest that Jesus served the crowds the Lord's Supper. After all, their food was fish and bread, not bread and wine. And Jesus doesn't make any mention of his body or blood (at least not in the Synoptic Gospels!).

Yet it is impossible for us Christians *not* to at least *think* about the Lord's Supper when we hear this miracle story, because both of them mention Jesus taking, blessing, breaking, and giving bread to his disciples. All of this serves to remind us that Jesus knows what we need, and he gladly provides us with daily bread, both physical and spiritual, for our body, mind, and spirit.

As Luther writes in the Small Catechism, “He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life” (SC, 1<sup>st</sup> Article of Apostles’ Creed).

God loves you, and he promises to take care of you. He urges us to ask for daily bread, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:11). Your heavenly Father knows what you need even before you ask (Matt. 6:8, 32). He knows that you need clothing and shoes, house and home, family and friends, good government, and good neighbors (SC). Even if you are unemployed or drowning in debt, God has a plan to provide for you. Despite our false impression that “God helps those who help themselves,” God, in fact, helps those who *cannot* help themselves. That’s what grace is all about. By the way, the proverb I quoted about God helping those who help themselves is not found in the Bible. Rather, it comes from Benjamin Franklin and his *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Franklin is wrong. Jesus is not. Our loving Lord gives us everything we need.

Better still, Jesus gives us *more* than we need. For the miracle is not merely that more than five thousand people had their fill of fish sandwiches—“they *all* ate and were satisfied” (Matt. 14:20). But the miracle is that there were *leftovers*! Twelve baskets full! They ended up with more than they started with, even after everyone ate dinner, because God blessed the bread and gave an abundance. Truly, he filled them with the finest of wheat (Ps. 147:14), even better than the “bread of heaven,” or manna, that the children of Israel ate in the wilderness for forty years.

The feeding of the five thousand not only gives us hope for tomorrow, but it also teaches us principles of stewardship. Notice that Jesus demanded everything the disciples had. Even if it was only five loaves and two fish, they obeyed when he said, “Bring them here to me.” They gave God 100% of what they had, and he gave it back to them by the baskets full! When we

give our tithes and offerings, God takes what is ours, no matter how small, and multiples it with a Gospel impact beyond our imagination. (Twelve baskets full!) That is why we must never hold back out of a scarcity mentality.

But there is more. Jesus also recognized that the gifts were not his or the disciples to own. The bread and fish did not belong to them. They were God's. And that is why, before he broke and distributed the fish and loaves, Jesus first looked into heaven and blessed them, giving thanks to the Giver for the gift. Nothing is truly "ours." Everything we "have" belongs to God. And that is why our stewardship verse for August is Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." *Everything* belongs to God, but because he so freely gives, he multiplies it back to us without measure.

"If you insist on what you pay for, you may get only that," writes Norman Nagel. "There are some things that you get here not because you have paid for them, but because they are given to you."<sup>1</sup> That's what grace is all about: God giving freely and fully, not because we deserve it, and not even because we ask, but simply because "when our Lord gives out, He gives it out bountifully. He is one who loves to give out good things."<sup>2</sup>

And the best gift of all is the gift of Jesus Christ, God's own Son, who offered up his life on the cross so that we could live forever. He met our greatest need—our sin—with his greatest gift: himself. And still he gives and gives, forgiving our sins, wiping away our tears, and filling our stomachs with the finest of wheat, his own Body and Blood in the bread and wine. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8)! Eat, and you will be satisfied (Matt. 12:20). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Nagel, "Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost," in *Selected Sermons of Norman Nagel: From Valparaiso to St. Louis* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 193.

<sup>2</sup> Nagel, *Selected Sermons*, 190.