

9th Weekend after Pentecost

Pr. Nicole Hanson-Lynn

Isaiah 55:1-5

Psalms 145:8-9, 14-21

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

Grace to you and peace from God our father, our lord and savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

With many of the well known passages from scripture, it's easy to become deaf to them. This is the feeding of the five thousand. Okay, I know this one. I know how it goes and what it's about. And I have a temptation to tune out at this passage.

But then I'm challenged to read it with new eyes. One commentator I was listening to this week retold the story without any names, and he pointed out just how much this story subverts our expectations. We've skipped over a chunk of Matthew between last week and this week, and part of what we skipped over was a jealous and arrogant political authority abducting a prophet who spoke from the wilderness about the need to repent because a new king was coming. And this jealous and arrogant political authority eventually, through a complete farce of bad decision making, embarrassment, and listening to the wrong people, has this prophet executed. Cue today's story. Where the one that this prophet has marked as the new king tries to step out into the wilderness for time to process and grieve.

Keep in mind that the wilderness surrounding Galilee is pretty barren, and the cities and towns were built on the hills, with the wilderness area often being lower, or on another hill nearby. It's a lot harder to hide in that wilderness than in the forest wilderness we have around here. And this king is found by *five thousand* men, plus women and children. Some scholars think this group may have been as large as *fifteen thousand* people (substantially larger than most towns in first century Judea). This is a group that is going to stand out and be noticed, especially right after the execution of the prophet. That's an army sized group. How many times have we seen this movie? When Katniss Everdeen and Luke Skywalker find the rebellions and lead the charge against the corrupt government. When Harry Potter finds first the Order of the Phoenix and then students who are willing to stand up against Voldemort's Death Eaters. In Lord of the Rings, when Rohan is losing the battle at Helm's Deep, Gandalf arrives to turn the tide of the battle with two thousand Rohirrim in the movie, but only *one thousand* in the book. And this gathering in the wilderness, surrounding the man the prophet has named the new king, is five thousand men, plus women and children. Like I said, we've all seen this movie before.

And yet, in this passage, that story is not the one that is told. Jesus, the king ushering in the kingdom of heaven, does not take advantage of his newfound army, but sees a crowd of people in need of compassion and healing and food.

The feeding of the five thousand is told in all four of the gospels (in Matthew and Mark, there are two large scale, miraculous feedings), it's one of very few memories that actually makes it into all four. And yet, each gospel writer remembers different details. Each gospel writer thought different parts of this story were important. For Matthew, the disciples are a key detail.

The disciples see numbers, and eventually in those numbers, they see a problem. How are they supposed to feed 15,000 people in the middle of the wilderness? Jesus, you need to send these people home to get their own food. And Jesus says, "No, you give them something to eat." Because clearly, this band of traveling disciples following their wanderlust rabbi through the wilderness brought enough food to feed a decently sized army, right? Another commentator ponders that as he reads this story again, the miraculous transformation of the five loaves and two fish seems vastly less important than the transformation that happens in the hearts of the disciples and maybe even the crowd. For people who believe in a God who wrote the laws of physics, temporary suspension of those laws is one thing. It's impressive numbers for sure, but kind of small compared to the creation of the whole world. But for people who believe in a God seeking genuine relationship with God's people, the transformation in their hearts as they move from fear and scarcity to abundance in the wilderness is another thing altogether. That has been God's "long game" since creating humans in the first place, and that is still God's "long game" today. That is what the kingdom of heaven looks like. When the faith the size of a mustard seed is enough. When the scarce offerings the disciples have, when the lunch leftovers are enough. And the journey is far from over even now. It can be hard to see the kingdom of heaven in the midst of the pain and fear and grief. Those gathered at this meal would have known that well. The disciples knew that well. And yet, the kingdom of heaven bubbles up in surprising times and places; in the midst of the wilderness, in the ambiguous space of grief, in love as we are called to love our neighbors. It's easy to be like the disciples, seeing numbers instead of people, seeing a problematic or emotional crowd rather than people in need of our compassion. And yet, Jesus tells those very disciples to share and serve and gather. And they find twelve baskets extra. And I do think that it is an encouraging story to hear of Jesus transforming the fish and bread into enough for all. And I think it is even more powerful to be reminded that Jesus transforms our hearts as well, opening the eyes of our hearts from scarcity to God's abundance.

Announcements

Thank you to everyone continuing their financial support. Your stewardship and discipleship are faithful witnesses in this time.

We still are offering Bible studies with video conferencing **and phone options**. If you are interested in joining, please call either Salem (906) 932-1510 or Zion (906) 932-1320.

We are excited to offer our Wednesday services sharing testimonies from the congregation. Today, you will find Jim Mildren's testimony from July 22 included. If you are interested in sharing a testimony, please call either office. Peace be with you!

Wednesday, July 29 Testimony from Jim Mildren

Here are the two poems I read for this Wednesday. In addition to these I spoke about Loving God and Loving your fellow human beings which is at the core of what I believe. I also read the " Parable of The Lost Sheep" which is my favorite passage from the bible . There are 100 sheep in the shepherds flock and one is lost out in the Wilderness. The shepherd leaves the flock of 99 unprotected to go out and find the one and return it to the flock. In the simplest of terms the Good Shepherd is God and the one sheep is the sinner gone off on his own. At the return of the sinner to God the Heaven's shine. The angels sing and all of Heaven rejoices at his or her return. God rejoices and I rejoice, the sinner rejoices and the joy that is felt is beyond description. What a great Parable. We know we are all sinners and our salvation lies in "Loving God". At the heart of our faith we are saved from sin by a God that loves us. To be out and lost in the Wilderness with out the company of anyone and then to be found and know that God loves you. How wonderful! The poet Naomi Nye writes. "To know kindness - To appreciate Kindness you must know loss" and I would add to that - To know forgiveness you must realize your own sin - We are all sinners and God forgives us. Thank God for that !!!!

Zion

I turn and bow to say a prayer
Fully aware that God loves me

Looking outward for his help
Looking inward to improve myself

Looking round - a stand of birch
Arms outstretched in thankfulness

A blaze of orange the rising sun
A tower built to face the east

Church bells chime welcome in the day
Song birds approach past stirring leaves

The breeze, it carries morning's scent
Of being born – a daily gift

A new beginning for thankful hearts
Forgiveness given and received.

At The Window

By Jim Mildren

The sun washes
My face
My hands
My heart

Your love fills
This room
This earth
This air

Your grace
Freely given
If only we ask
As we "forgive others"

So simply
You told us
To honor our parents
To not lie, cheat or steal

To help one another
To hold out our hand
To restrain our tongue
Be humble and kind

To ask your forgiveness
To hold on to "your" hand
To love all the people
As you have loved us.

Praying.... We need you
This world needs you too
And saying "yes" to God
In thoughts, words and deeds