

# The Bread of Life

Isaiah 55:1-12, Matthew 14:1-21

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick.”

Before there ever was a feeding of the 5,000, before there ever was the breaking of the bread, or the sharing of the fish, there was a deep and abiding hunger which demanded to be satisfied, and there was a determination to eat and to be filled. Jesus had something they needed, and they knew it, and they followed him on foot in order to be with him. He sailed away until he thought he was out of the reach of the crowds, but they heard, and followed, and arrived at the place where he was.

Are you hungry? Do you know about that ache deep within that will not be silenced and demands to be satisfied? Do you know about that gnawing in the stomach that reaches all the way through and grabs your backbone? Jesus Christ is the bread of life. Jesus Christ has that which we need, that which alone can fill us and satisfy our hunger.

In today's reading we are taught that he fed the hungry on a very simple, plain, real, and physical level that is good and true and important, and the gospel never moves too far away from meeting the very real and day-to-day needs of people. Jesus Christ also healed all of their sick—all of those who were brought to him with various ailments. He had compassion upon the crowds. He sought a retreat, but he did not turn them away when they came to him.

It is also the case here that Jesus exhibits extraordinary courage, and we will get to that in a moment. He tells the truth when the temptation would be not to tell the truth. But most of all here, as always, he preaches the gospel. He tells of the glory of God. He tells of the forgiveness of sin, of the salvation of the soul, and of the gift of eternal life. And this is the food for which we ache, and his name is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the bread of life for which we were made, which we need, that which will satisfy us as will nothing else.

Let me make two special notes about today's reading. The first is that Jesus does all of this in the very face of death. John the Baptist dared to stand up and tell the truth to power. He stood up for marriage and for what we would call today family values in the face of the sensual rulers of the day who denied and ignored the

proprieties of marriage and the importance of family values. Herod had married his brother's wife, which was not bad in and of itself, except that his brother was still alive, and she was still married to him! That is where the rub came in.

What John the Baptist does in telling the truth, and what the government does to him in executing him for his efforts, foreshadows Jesus Christ. The ministry of Christ parallels that of John the Baptist. John came preaching, and so did Jesus come preaching. John was arrested, and we know already that Jesus will be arrested, and now John has been executed. The seriousness of the ministry is real, and we know already what is going to happen to Jesus Christ.

This is a sign of the death that is to come. And if this were not apparent already all of the rest of his ministry will be carried out under this sign of death, and yet Jesus continued to tell the truth. He continued to preach the truth about life. The great lie afoot in our world is that death is all powerful, that death is ultimate, and that Jesus Christ now is still dead. That is the great lie afoot in our world. Jesus Christ in its very face continued to tell the truth—that God is greater than death. And now we know that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead and that his resurrection is the promise of our own. That is the great truth which we know and believe and tell, and which Jesus Christ continued to preach in the very face of death and under the sign of death.

A second note about today's reading is that people do and should go where they are fed. It says that they followed him. This gives the hint of a technical term about discipleship. They were his followers, but it is also true in a very plain, physical, literal sense they followed him on foot and found him. We have already noted that the 5,000 for whom this parable is named really represent at least 20,000 and perhaps more. They went where they knew they could be fed.

And so this reading tells us of the great responsibility of ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ministers are responsible to preach the gospel, to name the name of Jesus Christ, to break the bread of life before the people and so to feed the people. And at the same time it is the responsibility of the congregation to eat and to be filled; to hear the word of God; to pursue that word tenaciously; to overcome any barriers set in the way and to go where people are fed. If the word of God is not preached from the pulpit of our churches, we have two choices. One is to go elsewhere, where the people are fed, and the second is to take what measures are needed to ensure that the word of God is preached. That is what we need to do if and when the word of God is not preached, but if and when the word of God is preached, people will come and eat and be filled.

Jesus Christ is the bread of life. We are a hungry and needy people, and we gather here in worship to receive all the good gifts that he gives us. It is imperative when we come to admit our hunger and our neediness. We come with open hand,

palm upward, to receive the gifts that God places in our hands. If we deny our hunger, if we try to fool ourselves or others about our neediness, we will cut off the gifts of God. But as we are hungry we come here to be fed.

Jesus Christ is the bread of life, and he is also gives us a mission. At the end of the day the disciples were overwhelmed with the crowds, they were overwhelmed with being tired. They were overwhelmed with all that was set before them and they came to Jesus and said, “Send the people away. Let them go to the villages and buy their own food to eat.”

It is a little startling here. They do not even say “Lord” or “Master” or “Sir.” This is one of the very few places in the scripture where they address him so abruptly. But Jesus has a surprise for them. He says, “You give them something to eat.” He turns to his disciples and says, “You give them something to eat.” Then they become even more rude—almost sarcastic. They turn back to him and say, “We have only five loaves here and two fish! And you expect us to feed this whole crowd of people—whom are you kidding?”

I can see him shaking his head and saying, “Give them to me.” And he prays, and blesses, and breaks the bread, and he distributes the bread to the disciples, and they give it to the crowds and all eat and are satisfied. Jesus still tells us today, “You give them something to eat.” There are hungry people here and around the world. One of the things the church around the world has done best is to try to provide for the feeding of the hungry. This church has a wonderful mission with a variety of offerings and programs and missions and efforts. I am grateful for this, and I encourage us all to continue.

At the same time we are encouraged to give them something to eat in terms of the proclamation of the gospel and the good news of Jesus Christ. And here mission slips over into evangelism as we invite people to come to church. As we extend our radio ministry begun in 1924—and we are grateful that we are able to continue that—now we are looking at additional ways to reach out to others using the powers of new technology, computers, and the Internet as we seek to spread the word of God to all the people.

Jesus Christ is the bread of life. We have words to us here about worship, mission, evangelism, and also about stewardship. It is impressive that the disciples, dubious though they were, gave their all for the need of the moment. It is significant that they did not give Jesus Christ the heel off the end of the loaf of bread and say, “Here, take that.” They did not cut one of the five loaves in half and give him one half of a loaf. That by the way would have been a tithe that would have been one tenth or ten percent of the bread they had. They were not satisfied with that. They gave five loaves, two fish. They gave all that they had. Jesus blessed it and used it and fed the 20,000. So are we yet today called to worship, to mission, to

evangelism, and, yes, to stewardship. And before we go out to do all those good things, we are also invited not only to the Lord's Supper which we are today, but also to feast upon the word of God, the bread of life which is Jesus Christ, himself.

“Then [Jesus] ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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