

A 'Layered' Meditation on the Feeding of the 5000
Matthew 14:13-21
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, from our Gospel Reading: *Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them to me."*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our hymn *begs* us to meditate upon the sacramental undertones in our text, and we'll get to that. But, in order to properly appreciate that very deep layer of the onion, if you will, you must note and peel back the top layers. Thus, we ought consider this text as the occasion unfolds in history if we are going to truly appreciate how it applies to us even today in the Lord's Supper.

This miracle of the feeding of the 5000 is so central in identifying Jesus and his mission as our Christ that it is one of the only miracles of Jesus that all four gospel accounts record. Matthew mentions that the occasion is in the context of Jesus hearing about the beheading of John the Baptist. In his *divinity*, he already knows; in his *humanity*, he absorbs the news by withdrawing to a desolate place by himself. We ought recognize this context: death is about

him; death is around him. Enemies came for John, and Jesus already knows that in the garden by night, they will come for him.

So, in the face of death, Jesus pauses, withdraws for deliberation, tries to isolate for a time. But, the crowds come to him, and – even if grief over John’s death was occupying him – it could not overshadow his compassion for the crowd. He has compassion on them, stares down illness and death, heals the sick, and teaches the crowds the truth... a divine truth that will defend and instruct and protect them in the contest between death and life.

But evening comes and the disciples say, “Master, it’s time to send them away. This place is desolate, the day is over, there’s nothing for them here. Send them away that they may care for themselves.” But Jesus shows that his compassion towards them is not only to heal diseases that lead to death, but also to prevent *need* that leads to death. The Lord’s shepherding care is not only to *beat back* the enemy, but also to supply the simplest provisions that keep us from being *tempted by* the enemy. Though we so daily take it for granted, Jesus shows how divinely and constantly our Lord thinks on us, that he does not let the day pass without providing this day the crowd’s daily bread.

Now, this is the miracle at face value – happening once in history, recorded by numerous eyewitnesses, and attestable to by thousands more. We could stop here and say, “How foolish am I for hand-wringing about daily bread, for worrying about the next

paycheck or the next meal or whether my children will have shoes or whether I will have breath for tomorrow, for the Lord is compassionate, and he thinks on our most basic needs, and He will not allow even death itself to have the final say.”

Yes, that’s where we could end, go home and be newly aware and grateful for the abundant daily bread that blesses even the most humble of our households, and thank God for being so mindful of us.

But the “twelve baskets full” of leftover pieces, as the account mentions them, seem to hint there’s something more to this miracle. Perhaps its coincidental that the baskets numbered twelve, but – in the context of sacred Scripture – that’s unlikely. We know the number twelve to be so important, a number of the covenantal promises of God – whether twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament or twelve apostles in the New Testament – we know the significance of the promises attached to that number, so that that number is reflected in the stars of our new stained glass window and in the legs upholding the altar rail. Indeed, when we hear that Jesus provided leftovers numbering twelve baskets full, we are reminded that *He* is mindful of his new covenant promises; *He* remembers the prophetic word that eagerly anticipated those new covenant promises: “...he who has no money, come, buy and eat!... Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; *and I will make with you an everlasting covenant.*” Yes, Jesus himself

remembers His covenant with His Church, and – even in the simplest things, like daily bread – He comforts us with the awareness of His goodness, but also with the assurance of His own remembrance of His promises.

Thus, we can take a second look at this text and see how the Lord is here teaching us to trust in Him not just when a wandering crowd needs his help for one night’s meal, but rather – peeling a second layer of the onion, if you will – to trust Him with our entire lives.

In fact, consider this through a different lens: we love to relish in the glory of the miracle, the big numbers of people, the details of the few products from which everyone is fed. But, if you look again, it could be argued that the focal point of Matthew’s text isn’t actually even the *miracle itself*, but the dialogue that comes before it, which takes up the middle four verses of this nine verse text. And, does this dialogue not remind us how generally applicable is Christ’s exhortation ...not just to this crowd of 5000, but to all of life!

The disciples come to him and say, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over.” What does that mean but, “There is no help in this land for them; they cannot depend on any richness of the land, and they have lost any hope of daylight to help them. The situation is growing increasingly dark and hopeless. If you don’t send them to fend for themselves, all hope will be lost.” Friends, isn’t this

a commentary on all of life? Our wandering throughout life does not bring us to rich, fertile soil and great earthly opportunities for wealth and easy provision. Instead, if we are going to wander behind Jesus and be taught by him, will we not find ourselves in desolate places because his wisdom and truth remains long after the wealth of this world has been consumed by the ravenous ungodly, and we're left only in the barrenness of this life. So, now we cannot depend on the richness of the land. Nor can we depend on the length of our days; for darkness comes all too quickly, and we are constantly in the context of death, just as Jesus was in this text... just as the crowds who followed Jesus were, even though they did not see or feel it.

And, as the disciples consider those two great truths – the barrenness of the world and the approaching darkness – they say to Jesus, “What have we to offer them? At least, let them go and fend for themselves, that they might have hope.”

And, that's our instinctive reaction, too, isn't it? – that the crowds would be better off on their own? Don't we sometimes hear this text and think thus about our Lord: “Yeah, what kind of a loving Shepherd allows us to fall into such a miserable and helpless state? How could he not see this coming? We can't trust *him*. At least let us go see if we can get ourselves out of this mess! Maybe, if we at least can fend for ourselves, maybe then not all hope will be lost.” Yes, we share the same hope-in-self that the disciples confessed.

But, revisit their words again, and you'll see the futility of such confidence in the crowds in this desolate place, with increasing darkness descending upon them, and you'll recognize the Lord's compassion and teaching.

Friends, has this year proven our Lord *cannot* see the future coming and is a wandering Shepherd who allows us to fall into a miserable and helpless state? Or, has this year proven that the Lord who knows the ever-present context of death has patiently had compassion on His Church, gently led us in our weakness, and faithfully feeds us?

True, to do this, he must at times appear to be tone deaf and powerless. He must allow us to enter into a hard condition and suddenly become aware of our own frailty. Did we not enter this year 'flying high,' with record stock markets and record low unemployment and health, wealth, and happiness? And, with the country no longer torn over impeachment trials, we were poised to sail through this year with the riches and contentment of self-sufficiency.

And then, what happened? Did the Lord not humble us? Did he not prove to us how quickly He can remove from us our wealth and success... how suddenly He can grind a humming land of plenty into a stand-still land of barrenness, so that we poor miserable sinners even grew desperate for and hoarded toilet paper? Did He not take any air of invincibility out of our sails and remove from us

the idolatrous hope that this secular people will always and forever love and adore a piece of paper called the Constitution and by it forever govern with godly wisdom (as if it has any divine, everlasting quality to it)? Yes, we see how shaky *that* foundation is, as the Supreme Court suddenly interprets casinos as having more rights than the Church's supposed safety in the First Amendment... and as we see mayors and governors who swore an oath to the Constitution support and encourage those who would deface, destroy, and burn federal property and – with it – the relative certainty in our agreed-upon way of life. And, of course, all of this is in the context of death... yes, illness and death is all around us; it encompasses the entire backdrop of the situation, and God has taught us so suddenly just how mortal and frail and incapable of defending ourselves we really are! And, along the way, He has even taught us the futility of trusting scientists – as if always having the answers – and the foolishness of trusting journalists – as if always objective and fairminded – and the foolishness of trusting ourselves – as if, given just enough daylight, we can always provide for ourselves.

Hindsight is always 20/20, but we need not even look backward, but just to the present year of 2020, to see the certain futility and foolishness of hoping we can walk away from Jesus in this barren land, give light to the darkness, and provide for and safeguard ourselves.

And since we can't safeguard ourselves, who will we hold responsible for allowing the Shepherd to lead us into this valley of the shadow of death? Shall we chastise president and governor for not preventing us from being subject to God's instrument of discipline? No, we can rebuke the government for not showing Christian love and protecting nursing homes, and for not showing Christian faith and instead closing churches when we needed to call on the name of the Lord, and for not showing Christian wisdom and strength while bending the knee to anarchists... but only the fool would claim president and governor have power and control over this plague God Himself has permitted!

And so, if only God has control over the barrenness and darkness of our situation, then only God has the solution for it. And so, in our text, Jesus' says to his pastors-in-training: "*You* give them something to eat." We may want to quickly jump forward to the Sacrament, but we do not eat the Sacrament for the sake of consuming the Sacrament (nor do we always have opportunity to eat the Sacrament!). Thus, these words are broader than the Sacrament. Again, Jesus to his pastors: "*You* give them something to eat."

And how do the pastors respond? "Lord, we have nothing to give them. We are not farmers nor store owners. We have no wealth nor political power. We have no expertise in science or medicine. All we have to give them are churchly customs and bread and wine and water." And Jesus says "Bring them to me, and I will provide so

abundantly that they will all eat without price and leave twelve baskets full.” In other words, “By my divine authority, you my servants will distribute to them **my testament** and all of its blessing. That testament long prophesied to outshine and do away with the first and ancient testament of God.... That *new* testament for which I laid down my life, that new covenant which I made with My people and sealed with my blood. That new and *everlasting* covenant that promises far more than fertile soil in this land, but promises eternal life in the kingdom of heaven... And, by the way, while you focus them on this, all earthly provisions ever needed will abundantly be added unto them.”

Yes, Jesus says to his Twelve for His Church, “You give them something to eat. Good news that brings them out of darkness and into the eternal day. Good news that brings them out of the barrenness and desolation of this world and into the abundance and new creation of the life of the world to come. You give them *that* to eat...to consume...to inwardly digest... to live by.”

And so they do... They baptize you into a life of receiving the full inheritance of Jesus. They give you the full counsel of God’s Holy Word. They teach you to call upon His name in the divine invitation of prayer and to conform your will for daily life to His. They catechize you in His promise to provide every thing needed for this body and life. *And* (now we get to it!) they even feed you the very body and blood of the incarnate God Himself, who – even in the context of

death, even in the valley of the shadow of death – He brings his own flesh and blood – His *holy* flesh and blood – and spreads a banqueting table before you in the presence of all your enemies – society, anarchists, plague, death itself – and He bids you come and eat without price. Feast without price on the holy body and blood that sustains your frail body and blood. Feast without price on that living bread from heaven Who is so mindful of you that – blessing you on your way from His Divine Service - He Himself continues to provide even the needed daily bread of earth. And, behold, twelve baskets of leftovers (the disciples gathered) to always and ever remind you that you are a child of the covenant and a dear sheep of Christ. And that Good Shepherd who leads you through the valley of the shadow of death will ensure that nothing – not the barrenness nor darkness of the world, not even death itself – will snatch you out of his hand.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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