

Pentecost VIII (July 26, 2020) Text: Matthew 14:13-21; Isaiah 55:1-5
“Eat Up!”

How many of you had breakfast this morning? I ask that for several reasons.

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day (or so we have been told repeatedly, usually by the people who manufacture breakfast items) — so maybe I am just expressing common human affection in wondering if you’re taking good care of yourselves.

There used to be a very strong tradition among us Lutherans to abstain from eating breakfast if you were going to come to church and partake in the Sacrament — so I could have been curious to see if any of that tradition continues, and to see if there is anything that I, as your Pastor, need to attend to in terms of your personal spirituality.

But the real reason for my asking if you ate is to ascertain if, right now, are any of you are hungry?

We have all experienced some level of hunger. Few of us have the experience of malnutrition, where we have been denied food for days and weeks, and only limited intake for months. We are well aware that, throughout the world, hundreds of thousands of people endure just such hunger — because of famine, poverty, oppression, warfare, or all of these. We may also realize that, in the midst of this pandemic, many people are finding it hard to feed their families, and need to wait in endless lines at a food bank just to survive.

Yet most of us know what it’s like to miss a meal at lunchtime and tell ourselves that we are really ravenous as we sit down to the supper table. We can tell ourselves that the little touch of hunger pangs we feel in the late afternoon or late evening warrant our indulging in the bowl of ice cream, munching on some chips, or digging into the leftovers from supper. Or, if you have been spending a day in heavy-duty work (or perhaps exercise), you may come to mealtime feeling really, really

hungry.

People in today's Gospel have come to Jesus and spent most of the day in what Matthew makes it a point to tell us was ***“a deserted place.”*** We are not told expressly by Matthew that the folks are hungry; but the disciples make the assumption (probably warranted) that the crowd needs to be dispersed ***“so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”***

Clearly this concern shows that the disciples have learned something from Jesus about compassion; they just haven't learned enough. Imagine their dismay when, instead of dismissing the crowd and sending them on their way, Jesus instead turns to the Twelve and says, ***“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”*** I'll bet they weren't expecting anything like that.

Sometimes, when it comes to helping people, we are inclined to go the extra inch. We know well enough that Jesus modeled for us that we are to care for others. Matthew tells us in today's Gospel that, as soon as Jesus saw this crowd of people who had beaten a path to His private place, ***“He had compassion for them and cured their sick.”***

I can speak only for myself in this (although I suspect that many of you have had similar experiences), but if I had made a special effort to get to my quiet place, my first reaction to a crowd of people invading that retreat would hardly be compassion. Pique comes to mind; indignation; ***“Who do they think they are?”*** ***“Who do they think I am?”*** Upset? Anger? Feeling sorry for myself? Oh, yeah.

I, for one, am amazed that Jesus can keep it up. Just before this, Matthew tells us, Jesus had gotten word about the beheading of John the Baptist. If I had learned that my cousin, Phillip (the cousin I was closest to growing up), had just been killed in such a despicable manner, I would have gone into some level of depression. This was likely why the very human Jesus felt the need for some private time — we all need time to grieve if we have suffered a loss. The death of the Baptist was indeed a

serious loss for Jesus. Yet when this crowd of supplicants comes hoofing it and descend on Him, all Jesus does is to respond with compassion. I don't know about you, but I have a lot of growing to do in this area.

So now, the Twelve face a dilemma. Here they had (they thought) extended themselves to show concern for the crowd and Jesus upped the ante. It is not enough to be concerned that the crowd be allowed or even encouraged to find food — ***“you feed them!”*** *Say what? Why do we need to feed them?*

I will give the disciples due credit: they did not react with any kind of *“Why us?”* attitude. They did try to excuse their way out of it: ***“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”*** You can visualize their calculations: *“Jesus is a pretty light eater. There are twelve of us, so five divided by thirteen would come out to about a third of a loaf each and, if we split the two fish down the middle and then into four smaller pieces each half... well you know we're not going to get them exactly even, so there will be a couple of pieces larger and a few smaller, so it'll all come out more or less even.”*

Matthew does not relate where this lunch came from, but apparently the disciples considered it to be theirs (maybe Peter's wife had packed it for them?) Now, if there is one principle of stewardship that applies to every situation, it is that principle enunciated by the Psalmist: ***“The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it”*** (24:1). It does not matter who packed the lunch, who brought the lunch, or who claimed the lunch — those five loaves and two fish belong to God, and therefore, to Jesus.

Again, to their credit, the disciples do not challenge this. What if someone were to walk in here today and tell us that he is about to lose his job and the only reason is because his car cannot be fixed and he'll have no other way to get there. If he loses that job, then he will lose the house, go on welfare, become homeless, and enter into that downward spiral that engulfs all too many in our society. What if Jesus were to come to you with that man this morning and say, ***“Give him your car.”***

If you have greater compassion than I, you might do it. I, on the other hand, will look for all manner of reasons why that is not a good idea. *There's public transportation; you can use that. Surely there must be a friend or neighbor or family member who can drive you. How about a car pool? There must be co-workers who travel by or near your home. Make an arrangement with one of them! Hitch a ride, for cryin' out loud. People have done that for decades! It's why God gave us thumbs!*

As I said, to their credit, the disciples responded without objection and apparently without hesitation or discussion, when Jesus looked at this meager offering of bread and fish and said, ***“Bring them here to me.”***

All of which merely lays out the events of the miracle. What, if anything, is this miracle's impact, its significance, its importance? It must be important; aside from the resurrection, it is the only miracle performed by Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels. Matthew may have recorded this healing; Luke's record might include that exorcism; Mark may tell of the event involving wind and waves; John has only a few miracle stories altogether. But this one story, and only this one story, makes it into all four Gospels. Meaningful? I should say so!

Except . . . what does it mean? Could that be mere coincidence that this one account is shared by the four Evangelists? Yes, it could be. But I suspect not. For John, as is true of each of the few miracle stories he relates, this becomes an occasion for Jesus to teach. That teaching as a consequence of this event is what we have come to call the “Bread of Life” Discourse. For the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), it has overtones of something more than just an isolated event. Indeed, Matthew and Mark relate that Jesus did pretty much the same thing (if I read Matthew's chronology correctly) just a few days later, only this time with a few more loaves and not as many fish and He fed “only” 4,000 with that.

Now, the message could be something as simple as this: When people are hungry, in the name of Christ we must feed them. But what do we mean by “hungry?” There is physical hunger, to be sure — that's what caught

Jesus' heart here.

But there are other hungers that stir up great and deep longings within us humans: The hunger for acceptance; The hunger for security; The hunger to be valued; The hunger to be cared for; The hunger to be useful and productive; The hunger to belong; The hunger for personal worth.

We refer to these as “core longings” — and every sin that has ever reared its head in our lives has been connected somehow to these hungers. When we want acceptance so badly that we will abuse another person in order to fit in with the “in group,” that vital, God-given longing becomes a distorted mess. When we engage in whatever sycophantic behavior we think will get other people to approve of us, the longing to be valued become a sickness. When we bury ourselves in sixty-, seventy-, and eighty-hour work weeks, the hunger to be productive erodes into a mire of hyperactive workaholism. The hunger for security, distorted, becomes paranoia. The longing for worth gets twisted into tawdry self-indulgence.

All this happens when we try — in our confusion, our conceit, our arrogance, and/or our ignorance — to meet these essential, deep-rooted longings, these hungers, through the wrong means.

Of course this crowd came looking for Jesus. They probably could not articulate it in any cogent manner, but they knew . . . somehow they knew that Jesus was what and who they needed. Yes, in John's Gospel Jesus chides them for wanting nothing more than full bellies . . . but that only affirms that He has so much more to offer. Their hunger drove them to Jesus. So must ours.

Of all the hungers, the core longings, that fill our hearts, at the root of each of them is this: We hunger for God. There is created within each of us a deep-seated longing to know God and find a way to be close to God. Oh, to be sure, Satan feeds on our sin-filled minds and hearts to induce in us a fear of drawing close to God. He would have us believe (and there are many who would underscore this message, including some who claim to speak for God!) Satan would have us believe that God is dangerous!

Angry! Hostile! Threatening! Judgmental! And sometimes we are convinced that — or at least we begin to question if — God should just be kept at arm’s length

We often do this unthinkingly. We just go about our lives as if God were not there. What God wants from us, what God wants for us, simply does not enter into our calculations, our planning, our view toward the future. What we want, what we consider best for us, our desires, our appetites get top billing. As one of my friends puts it: *“I become the star in my own movie.”*

And then something happens. Somebody gets sick or hurt. A job is lost; a mortgage becomes unpayable. A friend turns out to be no friend at all. Some catastrophe or another strikes nearby — or maybe even halfway around the world — and we ask, if only internally, *“Where is God?”* In the asking we are brought into the awareness that God somehow does matter, that His presence is important, that His will has some sway. But, the issue resolves, the crisis ebbs, the pain subsides, and once again *“It’s showtime, starring ‘Guess who?’!!”*

So I ask again: *“Are you hungry?”* If you are, and not just this morning from a lack of breakfast, if you are in touch with that hunger, that longing that God has built into you and that so often and for so long you have relegated to the bottom of the priority list Then, with Isaiah this morning, I say: ***“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”***

Bring everything you have to Jesus, give it over to Him in faith and trust, and accept His invitation: *“Eat up!”* But then be ready for the miracle He is about to perform in our midst. What miracle? I don’t know — but then neither did the disciples when Jesus asked them to hand over their lunch . . . and look what happened!

Amen.