

“More Than Enough”

“And they all ate and were satisfied” (Mark 6:42).

One of the ways Lutherans care for each other is with food. When someone is sick, when a new baby is born, in the days after a move or a family crisis, the cookies and casseroles magically start showing up. It's a wonderful thing really, and, Lutheran or not, providing food is always a tangible way for people to express care, and to let others know that they aren't alone in their time of need. We even have a “Meals Ministry” here at Emmanuel, and, if you've ever participated in this work, or simply taken it upon yourself to bring someone a meal, you know that the only real rule is that you better make enough for everybody. In fact, running out of food is a cardinal sin when you are charged with feeding a large group, and, in today's Gospel reading, this becomes a major concern for the disciples...but, before we talk about this element of the story, we need to examine the details that had created such a desperate situation.

Earlier in chapter 6, Jesus had sent out the twelve disciples two by two with authority to cast out demons and preach a message of repentance. In His instructions He told them, “to take nothing for their journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money” – not even a change of clothes. These men had been out on the road, totally dependent on the hospitality of strangers (Mark 6:7-11), and the results had been amazing. Mark tells us that in addition to their preaching, these disciples had also “cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them” (Mark 6:12-13). They had followed Jesus' directions, they had completed an extraordinary journey and now these disciples were spent. They were physically, emotionally and spiritually, exhausted, and, as today's text begins, we're told that when they returned to tell Jesus about everything they had seen and done, there were so many people coming and going, and so many needs to be met, that they didn't even have time to eat.

It was clear to Jesus that His disciples needed to rest, and so they get into a boat and left this mass of needy people to try and find a little peace and quiet, but the crowd anticipated their line of direction and, Mark tells us, “they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them” (Mark 6:33). It almost seems like a scene from a zombie movie with the relentless mob hounding their every step. It certainly must have felt like that to the disciples. These men were drained and tired and hungry themselves, and even Jesus must have been weary...and yet, when He saw this great, unwashed hoard of people gathering on the shore, His reaction was not one of exasperation or disgust, instead, Mark tells us, “He had compassion on them” (Mark 6:34).

Compassion. This word is filled with meaning. In the original Greek, the word is “splanchnizomai” and it literally means to be moved in the gut; to have your insides ache; to have a physical reaction to the need of another. “He had compassion on them – splanchnizomai.” This word is found several times in the New Testament and it's almost always used to describe God's feelings for sinners. We see it in Luke 10, when the Good Samaritan comes across the dying stranger and is moved to help him; in Matthew 18, we find this term in the story of the Master who recognizes the impossible debt of His wicked servant and forgives it completely; and we find it again in Luke 15 where Jesus teaches about the Father who sees His prodigal son “when he was yet a great way off...and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.” This word indicates an intensely emotional reaction of unbridled sympathy and heartfelt concern and, as Jesus looked out over the great crowd, this is what Mark tells us: “He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. *And he began to teach them many things*” (Mark 6:34).

Now think about this for a minute. These people had come from “all the towns” to see this miracle worker who had driven out demons, healed the sick and even raised the dead. The physical needs reflected in this mob of people must have been overwhelming; the blind, the deaf, the lame, those possessed by evil spirits; this group contained every ailment and malady conceivable to man and yet He doesn’t heal anyone...instead, in His compassion for them, He *teaches them*.

I think this is quite significant. The physical needs of the people were obvious and yet Jesus sees them, not as patients without a doctor, but as sheep without a shepherd. In today’s Old Testament lesson, the Lord speaks a curse to the leaders of the people in Jeremiah’s day because they had forsaken their job as shepherds...*and the situation in Jesus’ day was no different*. The religious leaders charged with caring for the flock had, instead, crushed God’s people with an impossible burden of law, all the while teaching them the lie that if they were truly devoted to God then they would be able to keep His commands. These false shepherds didn’t talk about repentance, but were more concerned with moral improvement. They’d gutted the faith of Abraham and starved the people of the Old Testament promises that pointed to a God who loves mercy and not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6); to a God who opposes the proud the lifts up the humble (Proverbs 3:34); to a God who redeems, who forgives, and who, Himself, “is our Righteousness.” And so, because they were “like sheep without a shepherd” Jesus began to teach them many things.

And it’s here – as the Lord is providing living bread, as Jesus is teaching them the Gospel and pointing to Himself as the only righteousness that matters – it’s here that the exhausted and hungry disciples begin to worry about dinner...and in their words, we hear our own sinful voices: “This is a desolate place,” they said to Jesus, “and the hour is now late. Send them away to go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat” (Mark 6:35-36). Regardless of their motives, their concern was certainly valid. This massive crowd needed to eat. And *they* needed to eat. It was completely understandable and very appropriate that this question be raised...but the response of Jesus must have seemed absurd: “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37).

The disciples responded to this command from Jesus with a mixture of panic and indignation, and their response is one that we can all relate to. The truth is, we have all experienced times when the demands of the Word or the circumstances of our lives have put us into impossible situations; when our own resources simply aren’t enough; when we are backed into a corner and all we can do is throw up our hands, and admit that our situation is hopeless, and cry out for help. And it’s in that moment of surrender and honesty that God works and, in spite of what we lack, He provides what we need the most.

Mark writes, “Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass.⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all.⁴² And they all ate and were satisfied.⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men” (Mark 6:39-44).

Don’t think for a second that this miracle was about simply about feeding the crowd. In the ministry of Jesus, signs and wonders are always there to point to a greater reality; to underscore and illuminate what Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God; and, because of what happened on that day by the sea, the crowd, the disciples, and each one of us, learned the important truth that our relationship and standing with God isn’t based on our careful planning or good decisions; that His favor toward us doesn’t depend on our hard work or righteous behavior. Instead, in our brokenness and in our shame, in our sickness and in our pain, when we have nothing of our own left to grasp...Christ is with us. And when we have Christ, we have more than enough – in fact, we have everything! Amen.

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