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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11B)

July 19, 2015

Text: Mark 6:30–44

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

Think about an important event in your life. Your engagement or wedding day, your graduation. The day your children were baptized or confirmed. Did you celebrate that occasion with food and drink? The most important events in a person's life are typically celebrated with food. Birthdays have cake; newlyweds join their guests at the reception for food and the ritually prescribed cutting of the cake and the ceremonial first drink of champagne. Even on occasions of sadness, such as illness or funerals, food is shared as a means of expressing love. Food and feasting are appropriate when celebrating the many facets of human life.

We are introduced to an unexpected feast in today's gospel reading from Mark 6. Jesus feeds 5,000 men in the desert with simple bread and fish. In its outward appearance, this banquet cannot compare to the delicacies of Herod's birthday feast discussed in last week's worship service (Mk 6:14–29). You may recall that John the Baptist lost his life because of that sordid celebration. The divinely appointed forerunner to the Lord Jesus remained faithful unto death and so will participate in a glorious resurrection on the Last Day.

By contrast, the Lord's desert feast does not result in anyone's death. It's a true celebration rather than that empty caricature of one hosted by Herod.

The Lord's disciples had just returned from the Galilean towns and countryside after preaching the kingdom of God and casting out demons. According to vs. 30, they give Jesus a report of their many activities. Upon hearing their report, the Lord desires to give them some R&R. "Come away by yourself," said Jesus, "to a desolate place and rest a while" (vs. 31). So they get into a boat to sail to a quiet, restful place on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

But the crowds will have none of that. They somehow determine where Jesus and His disciples are heading and run there on foot ahead of them (vs. 33). Before they even get to shore, the crowd is there waiting for Him.

Vs. 34, “When [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.” Compassion. Today’s gospel reading is a sparkling example of divine compassion in action. In the midst of increasing opposition to His ministry and against the backdrop of John’s death, Jesus feels compassion for the crowd. That in itself is a glorious message of God’s grace and love found in the Lord. Jesus is never too busy, never too distracted by other things to take care of us. The Lord feels compassion for us down to the depths of His soul.

And what kind of compassion does Jesus give? Shepherding, for one. Herod certainly wasn’t shepherding God’s people. We saw what he did to God’s prophet: had him beheaded in order to preserve his pathetic reputation. The Scribes, Pharisees, lawyers, and Sadducees weren’t shepherding God’s people. Those “so called” shepherds of Israel left the flock to the predators of sin and despair and false hope. They provided no teaching in holy truths to secure their hearts and minds; no participation in the divine things to strengthen their most holy faith. The crowd was a flock of wandering sheep, easy prey for the devil, the world, and even their own sinful flesh. No wonder Jesus felt compassion to the depths of His soul.

Jesus “began to teach them many things” (vs. 34). Through the sound of Jesus’ human words and ordinary vocabulary, God was speaking peace and deliverance into people’s lives. Only through the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ do we have access to God. We fall into the trap of thinking of Jesus as being somewhere out there ruling the cosmos with uncontested might. And that’s true enough. But to find God in His grace and mercy you must go through Christ’s humanity given to us through His appointed, tangible means: Word, Baptism, Absolution, and Supper. God in Christ is present with us through common, ordinary things, covering us with His compassion.

The 12 disciples think the Lord’s compassionate teaching is all well and good but there’s a problem. It’s getting late. People are hungry. Vs. 35–36, “His disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.’” Pretty practical. But their humanistic pragmatism basically says, “Scatter the flock and let them fend for themselves!”

You’ve just got to love it. Jesus and His 12 disciples are light-years apart from each other. Mark describes the difference with remarkable subtlety. The disciples instruct Jesus to send the crowds away so that the crowds can take care of “*themselves*” (vs.

36). That was the word they used, “themselves.” Jesus issues a different command, “You take care of it!”

Really?! “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” (vs. 37). One wonders if the disciples actually have that much money or if they are simply exaggerating to make a point. 200 denarii is about 6½ months wages for a day laborer. Do you think 7 months worth of bread will feed this many people?

Jesus responds with calm subtlety, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see” (vs. 38). After some search, the disciples scraped up 5 loaves and 2 fish. The desert cupboard isn’t bursting full with abundance! With those simple gifts, Jesus’ compassion finds its way to the crowd yet again. All 5,000 men are fed to the full. The loaves and the fish never ran out. The room in people’s stomach filled up way before Jesus stopped giving food. It was a desert feast.

We Christians are all too content thinking that Jesus only takes care of our spiritual problems. He forgives sins, He comforts our afflicted conscience. But Jesus is concerned for the whole person, soul as well as body. Today’s gospel reading reminds us that the Lord’s compassion extends over our physical and spiritual needs. We should not separate the two. Jesus is the compassionate Lord over body and soul.

Let’s consider how Jesus takes care of both soul and body in the feeding of the 5,000. After arranging them on “green grass” (vs. 39) in orderly groups of hundreds and fifties – you might say He arranged His congregation decently and in order (vs. 40, c.p., I Cor 14:40) – Jesus takes the bread and fish, looks up to heaven, says a blessing, breaks the bread and gives it to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. Sound a bit familiar? It should. “Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed took bread....In the same way also He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them saying....” When Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives bread and fish to the crowds, He’s foreshadowing what is to occur in the giving of the Lord’s Supper.

Receiving the body and blood of Jesus isn’t merely a nice remembrance meal. It’s the compassion of Christ being felt on your tongue, in your mouth, straight to your soul. It’s a divine feast of Jesus’ precious body and blood given for your body and soul in the present, the future, and into eternity. The Small Catechism reminds us about the bodily and spiritual blessing of the Lord’s Supper, “for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”

Jesus promises to sustain our bodies on this side of eternity with His earthly gifts given through godly vocations such as father, mothers, workers, government, good weather, and so forth. But Jesus also promises to raise our bodies in the resurrection on the Last Day so that we can live with Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness in both body and soul. The Lord's Supper is a pledge and promise of earthly strength and divine forgiveness in the here and now as well as the assurance of a glorious, bodily resurrection on the Last Day.

What we do each and every week in Church is really dress rehearsal for the full and complete feast on the Last Day. Mark 6 becomes the pattern for life in Christ's Church. To this very day, your pastor, your under-shepherd, gathers Christ's sheep around His table to receive His love and compassion through simple words, bread and wine: Word and Sacrament ministry.

And don't worry about there being enough compassion, grace, and love. After the crowd ate to the fill, the disciples picked up twelve full baskets of broken pieces. There's always enough and more to spare. It's a feast after all!

Our needs—ordinary and mundane though they be—are often provided for by Christ through the most unlikely of means. Five loaves and two fish feed 5,000 men. What's most amazing is not the miracle—the crowd doesn't seem to know about the miracle—but the compassion behind the miracle. “Just bring what's here and I'll use it,” says Jesus.

It's tempting to think that we're too small to make a difference here in our community much less the world. But Jesus' compassion overrules any of our logical reasons as to why we're too small, too insignificant to matter. Jesus smiles and says, “Bring what you have here to Me.” He'll take us, bless us, break us for His purpose, and then give us to the world for the benefit and salvation of many people in both body and soul. What matters most of all is Jesus' compassion. So come then, dear people of God. Come to Jesus' feast and receive His compassion in body and soul. With Him there is always enough to go around; enough compassion, enough forgiveness, enough of Jesus for every hungry mouth and heart. It's a feast after all!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.