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EIGHTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST August 3, 2014

“Hunger”

(Matthew 14:13-21)

Rev. David K. Groth

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. 15 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 go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17 They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." 18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 14:13-21

Collect of the Day

Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

So who are these faceless, nameless people in the crowd following Jesus? Actually, we know quite a lot about them. Just a few of them are wealthy, influential, and respectable. Most are run of the mill . . . like you and me, with the same hopes and dreams and aspirations we have. Some are poor, living on the margins, trying to scratch out a living, trying to survive. And there are sinners and adulterers in the mix, even a few tax collectors, those despicable characters who made their living working for the Romans and who profited by overcharging their neighbors. And, of course, there are some who are mentally ill and others who are blind, or hobbling on crutches and canes and walking sticks, led by their families, carried on the backs of their strong sons and grandsons. It's a large crowd, 5,000 men, not including women and children whose roles in the first century were rigidly defined: women were more like property than persons; children were expendable. In other words, many in this crowd concluded long ago they mattered little to anyone.

It's late in the day. The disciples and Jesus are exhausted and hungry. Earlier, Jesus had sent them out two by two, to go to the Galilean towns, teaching and healing. It was their first experience with that sort of thing. As they began to reunite, tired from their experiences, hungry, they are eager to talk with one another and with him about what they had done and how it had gone. You've done that, had an incredible experience or trip and wanted nothing more than to talk it over and process it. They want . . . no they need some down time for that.

And so Jesus suggests they take the night off, find a quiet place where they can have a good meal, some

conversation and a good night's sleep. They climb in the boat and, with the setting sun behind them, make for the other shore of the lake. But the crowd, persistent and noisy, sees them leaving. Word spreads and the crowd begins to move along the shoreline, and by the time the little boat reaches its destination a few miles up the shoreline, it isn't a quiet spot at all. The crowd is already there. It would have been easy enough to turn the boat and head out to sea again, but Jesus' compassion gets in the way. And so the little boat quietly slides into the shore. Jesus, the Good Physician, immediately begins tending to the sick.

Time passes. Evening approaches, Matthew is careful to note the disciples are left wondering what happened to their happy hour, and their dinner, and that good night's sleep. "Uh. . . Jesus" they say. "Remember us, your friends, and the plan... and the meal. This was supposed to be the quiet place. It's getting late. How about we send them away now. Besides, they're hungry too. If they don't get a move on, they'll have nothing to eat." Matthew records a testy little exchange.

"Jesus, will you please send them away."

"They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat."

"Us? In case you haven't noticed, we barely have enough for ourselves, let alone all of them." "What do you have?"

"Some kid here gave us his lunch."

"Have the people sit down!"

And then, who knows what happened or how it happened. Matthew only writes that Jesus gave thanks, broke the bread and cut the fish. Jesus gave and gave and gave, and however much he gave away there was always more to give. Everybody ate. Everybody had enough to eat. And there was plenty left over. The people were hungry and Jesus satisfied their hunger. They were reminded where daily bread comes from.

And they learned his grace is sufficient and that he wants to give his grace to all people.

A few years back I reread the old classic Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe was shipwrecked on an uninhabited island. One of the first things he did was swim back to the broken ship and manage to salvage about a dozen seeds of corn. He said, "I foresaw that in time, it would please God to supply me with bread." It would take four years and all the ingenuity he could muster. He had to clear sufficient land with a little hatchet and cultivate it with a handmade, wooden spade. And then sow, and weed, and protect the maturing ears of corn from island animals. He had to gather the corn, and find a safe way of storing it until the ears were dry, and then rub the kernels off the ears with his thumbs. For four years he replanted whatever he harvested. When he finally had enough he made a makeshift mill and a makeshift oven, and, finally had some bread. All that he summarizes with the words, "God supplied me with bread". In spite of the sweat on his brow and the calluses on his hands, God supplied me with bread.

That is one of the points of today. As hard as we work, and have worked, it would be inaccurate, and maybe even a little devilish, to survey our accomplishments and put on boastful airs. "Give us this day our daily bread" we pray, and when he does we become proud of those blessings of house, home, occupation, investments, even conceited, wondering why others haven't done so well. "They never learned how to work" we assume "or to save". "They're lazy and incompetent."

Daily bread comes from God. He gives us the strength, the health, the wisdom, the time, the employment, good government, freedom, peace, and everything else we need to support this body and life. If he were to withdraw his sustaining hand from you or me . . . that would be the end of it. So we can take about as much credit for our daily bread as that crowd

of 5,000 sitting on the hill. All they did was sit and receive. And so it is with us. In spite of the sweat on our brow and calluses on our hands, it is God who deserves our thanks and praise.

The crowd that day was reminded where daily bread comes from. And if they were paying attention, they learned his grace is sufficient. Five little loaves and two little fish... lunch sufficient enough for a boy. But Jesus turns it into a feast for thousands with 12 basketfuls leftover.

God can do a lot with a little. “Let there be light.” Just four words and we have the sun, moon and a canopy of stars. “Come, follow me” and with a handful of disciples, he turns the world upside down. With a little spittle and a bit of dirt he makes a salve that gives sight to a blind man. And with a boy’s lunch, he feeds thousands. It seems to me we would do well to remember that here at Good Shepherd. We are not a megachurch nor is our school bursting at the seams. Heaven knows our budget has limitations. If we wanted, we could talk ourselves out of a whole lot of ministry. We could do what the disciples did. “Jesus, this is all we have, but that’s nothing in comparison to all these needs. Why not send everyone home.” But remember the promise: “My grace is sufficient for you.”

These are not just words for a cheesy poster or for on the side of a coffee cup. Those are words to feast, to digest. Make them part of who you are. My grace is sufficient for you. Part of what that means is Jesus can do a lot with a little. Whether working with a mustard seed of faith, or a few handfuls of water in the font, the Lord can do a lot with a little. Whether working through a teacher to shape a few young minds and hearts, or a handful of people intent on satisfying the hunger of children with sandwiches in the park and, at the same time, showing them the grace of the Good Shepherd. The Lord can do a lot with a little, also in with an under a thin wafer of bread and a sip of wine.

Finally, it's clear Jesus wants to give his gifts to all people. He's not being picky here, is he? All were hungry. All ate until they were satisfied. He didn't withhold his gifts from any. Did they do anything to earn this meal? Not a thing. Did it cost the people anything? Not a penny. Were there any scoundrels in the mix who didn't deserve a free lunch? Absolutely. In fact, from God's perspective, knowing what he knows, every one of them was as scoundrel as is every one of us. And yet see how he fed and cared for them, and how he feeds and cares for us.

Very simply this is a picture of grace. Jesus does the giving. We do the receiving. There is no cost, nor is there any way we can pay for it or earn it. And as much as we receive, he has always more to give, more than we either desire or deserve.

The same thing is going on in the Old Testament lesson. "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Four times in that text we hear the invitation, "Come!" The Lord is nearly begging us. And all we have to do is what that crowd had to do: sit down and relax and be willing to receive.

By the way, did you notice who did the serving and who was being served? Matthew noticed. None of the men in that crowd had ever been served by anyone other than their wives or daughters, or, perhaps a slave. But here we have the disciples distributing the food to women and children, to sinners and tax collectors, to the sick and the aged, as if somehow it didn't matter. In the eyes of God everyone was equally important, equally welcome. And while all this might have scared Jerusalem and Rome half to death, to the crowd it seemed like a breath of fresh air.

Finally, did you notice the sequence of verbs in our text? "He took . . . gave thanks . . . broke . . . and gave it to his disciples." It's the same sequence that comes with the Lord's Supper, and that's no accident.

This feast is a foretaste of the Lord's Supper which itself is a foretaste of the banquet in heaven. Grace is at the center of each. Each is free. Each is for sinners. Each contains more than can be taken in. And in each, you're never eating alone. You are eating with others and with Him.

We are part of a crowd that comes to him with nothing to point to. We come empty handed, hungry and unworthy, but he welcomes us and feeds us, he loves us and satisfies us. That is the Good News of the Gospel, and it is at least as satisfying as a chunk of good, crusty bread when you think you're dying of hunger.

Jesus, taking the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people. And all ate and all were satisfied. And they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. Doing so, he reminded us where our daily bread comes from, that his grace is sufficient, and that he desires to give his grace to all people. All praise be to him. Amen.

