

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (a)
Isaiah 55:1-5 Romans 9:1-5 Matthew 14:13-21
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
August 1 and 2, 2020 (Traditional)

Imagine the huge crowd out in the remote countryside gathered around Jesus, listening to him talk about the kingdom of God. He's inspiring, he's thought-provoking, they're fascinated by what he says and they want more. But now it's getting late. The sun is going down. Stomachs are starting to grumble. The disciples are thinking it's time to call it a day. They're far from any town and people are getting hungry.

That's when Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them: "How are you going to feed all these people?" And the disciples are surprised: "What? We're supposed to *feed* them?" Suddenly it's no longer passive listening in a classroom. Jesus wants them to *do God's will*. And you see how those disciples immediately know that they do not have what it takes to do what Jesus wants them to do. That is the truth of their situation, they see it clearly: there's not enough food to go around. There's only one way to get out of this dead-end situation, so that God's will for all those people is done. Jesus, in a kind of precursor to the Last Supper, and a foreshadowing of his resurrection from death, takes a small, inadequate portion of food—five loaves and two fish—and makes such a huge feast out of it that it feeds everyone with 12 basketfuls left over. Only a miracle performed by God himself makes it possible for everyone to get fed at the end of the day.

First of all, the gospel is showing us that Jesus cares about people's worldly needs. He cares about worldly hunger. He wants his disciples—he wants his church—to not sit around talking about spiritual stuff all the time. He wants the fullness and the abundance of the kingdom of God to show itself in this world through full stomachs...people taking care of each other's physical needs. A congregation that isn't serving people in everyday ways has become too spiritual. I know that sounds strange coming from a pastor. But everywhere he went, Jesus healed people physically to show that his words were not just words—they carried the power of the Kingdom; they brought God's lifegiving power into the here and now. Few of us are miracle workers, obviously, but we can certainly all help take care of people's worldly needs in Jesus' name. The members of St. John's take care of each other and people in our community so that people see that our words are not just spiritual words—they are backed up with the power of life and real love and forgiveness and healing. Jesus cares for people's worldly needs.

Right along with that, the feeding of the 5,000 highlights our limitations as human beings, and the limitations of broken world. There's limited time in the day to do what we need to do. We've got limited energy, limited resources to work with. We're created in God's image, but we're always going to be finite creatures. Adam and Eve in Eden, even before they ate from the wrong tree, could only do one thing at a time in the garden, they were no different from us that way. There's nothing bad at all about being limited creatures. As long as God is feeding us and giving us life out of his inexhaustible power, being limited is fine. As long as we're being fed by him, we can embrace our God-given limitations.

But that's the thing, sin breaks our trust in God, it breaks our relationship with him. It's still God who's feeding us out of his grace, but we're always trying to eat from the wrong tree — trying to get life for ourselves out of worldly, created things that cannot feed us for very long. So we experience life as a kind of hunger that can never be satisfied. Instead of us being OK with our God-given limitations, we experience them as bondage. Without trusting God, our limitations are always reminding us that we're small, mortal creatures who are running out of life and time. All we see is the sun going down; the night is coming, the food is running out. We start wishing we were God; we start trying to be God. All sorts of bad stuff starts happening when we can't embrace our limitations.

No wonder the disciples in the gospel see five loaves of bread and two fish and their basic response is hopelessness. This is not going to be enough. Why even try to feed more stomachs than our own? We've got to hold on to what little we've got. I don't want to let go of this little bit of worldly limited food...it's all I have! Yes, it's limited, but the big issue is that we get spiritually stuck there, desperately trying to eat off that worldly tree that'll never be able to feed us. It's all we can see. Jesus' response to that is: "bring those five loaves and two fish to me."

That's one reason why Jesus came into this world: so we can stop depending on our stuff and trust him. Now we know where to direct our resources. Rather than being trapped spiritually in our stuff, that's always running out, give it all to Christ! Let our lives — everything we own, everything we have, our time, talent, treasure...our relationships — let it all be transformed by the relationship of love

and trust we have with God in Christ. Instead of being owned by all this stuff that can't give us life, let's be owned by the one who loves us and brings us a life that's constantly refreshed, renewed, endless, flowing from the source. Whatever you've got...in whatever limited amount...direct it towards its original purpose. Lift it all up in worship to God. Obviously God doesn't need what we give him. This is about living in a relationship of receiving and giving that we can trust, instead of putting our trust in the stuff itself.

Another beautiful thing in today's gospel. Jesus teaches here and elsewhere that when we offer our gifts away to his glory, he gives them back to us again, multiplied. Now this is something we will not believe until we do it. But God always comes through on his promises. In the gospel, 5 loaves of bread and two fish given over to Jesus become a feast for thousands, with 12 baskets of food left over.

Holy Communion is the ultimate example. Every week we bring our limited offerings to the altar. We bring some wine made from some grapes grown somewhere, probably California, we bring some bread that someone in our congregation made in their oven at home with ingredients from a local store, or wafers made in the communion wafer factory. We bring these worldly, limited, everyday gifts to the altar; and isn't it awesome, beyond words, what God does with these worldly limited gifts. A few minutes later, we're hearing—"this is my body, given for you, this is my blood, shed for you." These are small gifts we bring—the limited money we made through the work of our hands, these gifts we make out of our limited human effort, grapes and bread—they don't seem to go

that far, they don't last very long. But God transforms these small, finite offerings into a gift that blows apart time and brings us into physical communion with him. A union that lasts forever.

A little girl gave me a huge bunch of flowers once before church. It was very sweet. I remember it well because I was surprised at the sheer size of this bundle of flowers, and I told her "Gee, I hope you kept some for yourself!" She answered, "These are the kind that the more you pick, the more they grow."

Jesus repeatedly says that with God, that's how it is! The more we let go of our lives and give them over to God, and to others in God's name, the more we experience life flowing in as a put gift. Five loaves and two fish blessed by Jesus become a feast for thousands, with twelve baskets of food left over. Luther wrote, "God does all this giving out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it. Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him." And I surely ought to give, and give, and give again what God has given me...I should go ahead and spend myself, and not count the cost. It's easy to do when we already have the final prize: the One who died on the cross, to turn it into the tree of endless life for you and me.