

“A Meal to Remember”

“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Of the many meals we eat in the course of our lives, a few stand out as being memorable for many reasons. It may be a meal that is extraordinarily delicious, be it at a fine restaurant or the home of a talented cook. It may be a meal that celebrates a special occasion such as a birthday, wedding, or anniversary. It may be a meal that was the first date in what grew into a lifelong love affair and blessed marriage. Whatever the occasion, these meals stay in our memories as occasions that we cherish in our memories and in some cases even changed the course of our lives. They are truly meals that we always remember.

The meal that is presented in today’s Gospel lesson is one of the most famous meals in the Bible, the meal known as the Feeding of the Five Thousand. It is a miraculous feeding that is so important in the Gospels that it is the only miracle story of Jesus that is found in all four Gospels in the New Testament (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:32-44, Luke 9:10b-17, John 6:1-15). While there are variations in the details presented by the four Evangelists, the story is basically the same: a large crowd has come out of the cities to hear Jesus’ preaching and experience his miraculous healings. As evening approaches, the disciples become concerned that there is no food to feed such a large multitude (the number “five thousand” is misleading, since it refers to five thousand households and not five thousand individuals; the actual number could have been in the tens of thousands). The disciples approach Jesus, suggesting that he send the crowds away so that they might find food in the local towns. But Jesus has another idea; in more than one rendering of his story he responds to the disciples’ suggesting by turning the responsibility for feeding back on them: “*You give them something to eat*” (Matthew 14:16; Mark 6:37; Luke 9:13). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus initiates the conversation by asking Philip, “*where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?*” (John 6:5). The disciples are caught off guard by Jesus’ suggestion; all they can find are five loaves of bread and two fish. But Jesus already knows what he is going to do in providing a meal that will not only satisfy the hunger of the multitudes while giving them a meal they will remember.

John's account of the feeding of the multitude begins with a reference to an event that has happened in the verses before today's Gospel lesson: "*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.*" (Matthew 14:13). Jesus has just received the news of the martyrdom of John the Baptist, who had been beheaded by Herod Antipas and buried by his disciples (14:9-12). Jesus withdraws to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where Herod had no authority. Jesus undoubtedly needed time to grieve the loss of this person who played a critical role in his life and early ministry; he may also have wanted to move out of Herod's sphere of influence lest the fate that befell John fall upon him before the hour of his passion and death in Jerusalem arrived: "*Jesus has good reason, therefore, to seek to lay low for a while, or at least to tend to his own spirit in solitude.*" (Matt Skinner). But his time of solitude is short-lived, because "*when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.*" (14:13b). We might expect Jesus to be annoyed that the crowds would not allow him adequate time to grieve the death of John; but instead, "*when he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick*" (14:14). For Jesus, "*the sheer volume of human need always outweighs other concerns, and so Jesus' compassion seizes his guts and prompts him to heal. So much for carving out some inconspicuousness during this risky time!*" (Skinner). Jesus embodies the love of God, "*the steadfast love of the LORD [that] never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*" (Leviticus 3:22-24).

- "The story certainly has a historical core in the sense that there was a historical Jesus who was a compassionate person who responded to people in need. The whole event of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was pictured by Christian faith as God's response to humanity's deepest needs, here portrayed as hungering multitudes." – M. Eugene Boring.

As evening falls, the disciples become concerned about the crowd's need to be fed. Matthew does not picture the multitude as hungry or destitute, unable to purchase food, but as being so enthralled by Jesus' healing activity that they are reluctant to leave. This is why they approach Jesus and advise him that "*this is a deserted place, and the hour is late; send the crowds away so that they might go into the villages and buy food for themselves*" (14:15). Their recommendation is rooted in compassion, because "*the desert brings real practical challenges for staying alive, unless you're planning for manna and quail to fall from the sky or something extraordinary like that*" (Skinner). But Jesus also has compassion for the crowds, and this compassion includes encouraging the continuing presence of the crowds with him. So instead of taking the disciples' advice and dismissing them, he

responds with another suggestion: “*They need not go away; you give them something to eat*” (14:16). The disciples interpret this to mean that Jesus expects them to provide food to feed the multitude, which of course would be impossible. As they look at what they have, they reply that “*we have nothing but five loaves and two fish*” (14:17), which would barely feed the Twelve much less the Five Thousand. But this reality does not deter Jesus from instructing the disciples to “*bring them here to me*” after which “*he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass*” (14:18-19a). As was traditional for a host at a Jewish feast, Jesus “*blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds*” (14:19b). The disciples fulfill Jesus’ command that they give the crowds food to eat, but the food they share is not a meal that they provide but is a meal they serve that comes from the Lord who provides a miraculous feeding for those gathered in his presence. Feeding miracles are common in the Old Testament, from the manna God provided the people in the wilderness to Elijah’s providing food for the widow of Zarephath to Elisha’s feeding a multitude with meager resources:

- “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.’” – Exodus 16:4.
- “For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: the jar of meal will not be emptied, and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.” – 1 Kings 17:14.
- “A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat.’ But his servant said, ‘How can I set this before a hundred people?’ So, he repeated, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, “They shall eat and have some left.”’ He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.” – 2 Kings 4:42-44.

While Jesus’ miraculous feeding is similar to these found in the Hebrew Scriptures, Christ’s miracle shows that he wields a power greater than that of the prophets of Israel, for he started with fewer loaves than Elisha to feed a vastly larger crowd. The miracle is also an anticipatory sign of the Eucharist that is to be distributed as communion to the multitudes of God’s people “*in remembrance of me*” (Luke 22:19). The abundance present at this miraculous feeding is indicated by the account that “*all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full*” (14:20). The abundance of the leftover fragments is a documentation of the greatness of the miracle which stands in contrast to the gift of manna in the wilderness which could not be preserved (“*Morning by morning they*

gathered it, as much as they needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted” – Exodus 16:21); it is also a portrayal of the messianic times, when hunger will be replaced by extravagance:

- “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” – Revelation 7:16-17.

The account of the miraculous feeding ends with a report that *“those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children”* (14:21), expanding the number of people present and thus the greatness of the miracle. It evokes an image of the people of God in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land sustained by God’s miraculous feeding and compassionate care: *“The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children”* (Exodus 12:37).

- “For here we see, since the people followed Christ for the sake of God’s Word and the signs, and thus sought the Kingdom of God, he did not forsake them but richly fed them. He hereby also shows that, rather than those who seek the Kingdom of God should suffer need, the grass of the desert should become wheat, or a crumb of bread would be turned into a thousand loaves ... so that we may indeed let him care for us, remember that he cares more and sooner for us than we do for ourselves.” – Martin Luther.

Following this miraculous feeding, Matthew continues his account of the ministry of Jesus that will lead to his death and resurrection; but nothing is said of the crowds who have experienced this feeding in the desert. What is their response to have witnessed and experienced Jesus’ miracle firsthand? How do they remember this meal? Is it a day that they will honour every year, a story they will share with their children and neighbours, or an experience that will help them understand what it means to follow the one who fed them in the wilderness? We do not have any reports in the Gospels of the lasting impact of this miracle on the crowds, but when they reflected on what they had experienced the words of the prophet Isaiah may have come to mind and interpreted in a new way:

- “Ho, everyone who is thirsty, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your

labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” – Isaiah 55:1-2.

These words of hope are spoken to the people who are returning to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon, the people who have heard the word of “*comfort, O comfort my people, says your God*” (Isaiah 40:1). They are words of divine invitation, renewal and restoration, and vocation, “*both a reaffirmation of God’s presence in their midst and a reinterpretation of what God’s presence means when God’s people find themselves in a new time and place*” (Kristin J. Wendland). The waters that were once a source of destruction are no longer a threat (“*Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you*” – 54:9). The voice of God invites the people to a feast at which there is abundance that is given without cost; gifts of wine, milk and bread that are freely given to all who are invited to the table of the Lord, echoing the voice of Wisdom in Proverbs that calls out to “*you that are simple, turn in here! To those without sense she says, ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine that I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of insight.’*” (Proverbs 9:4-6). The list of those invited is not limited to people of social standing; the only requirement is hunger and thirst. As those who come to the feast will be rewarded with the abundance of the Lord that is freely given to all who accept the invitation, those who refuse to come to the banquet open to all and who turn instead to the more elegant company of the few enjoying special privilege belong to those who “*spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy.*” The most precious gift of all, the gift of life in God’s presence, is free; “*the blessings of the Lord’s covenant include both a joyous spiritual relationship with God and a fullness of physical life that includes a return to the land of Israel.*” (Gary W. Light).

As those who ate freely of Jesus’ meal might have remembered the meal that Isaiah offered to those returning from exile, they may also have remembered that in the name of the same God who invited all to the banquet the prophet announced that God’s plan had not been defeated by the ruin of the royal house of David but rather that the everlasting covenant was not to be expanded beyond the privileged elite to embrace the entire community of those obedient to God’s Word: “*Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.*” (55:3). The sure love for David, expressed in God’s promises to him with respect to the nations, is not the purview of the people who incline their ears and listen, as former generations had not. The vocation of being “*a witness to the people*” (55:4) once assigned to David will now pass to the entire community of those faithful to God, including those who had

experienced the goodness of God's abundant blessings in having been fed by Jesus in the wilderness.

- “David, indeed, had been the Lord's servant, but now all are invited to become servants of the Lord. The ‘everlasting covenant’ and God's ‘steadfast, sure love for David’ had not been negated. On the contrary, they were being expanded! All are invited to fulfill the role of David in the covenant as a witness, guide, and evangelist.” – Light.

As God invites all people to feast on the abundance of God's gracious offering, God now invites all people to be those who will “*call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you*” (55:5).

- “It is striking what sort of flexibility God is prepared to show with the word once delivered. Clear reversals of judgment, promised beforehand, are executed. Waters once rejected are offered again. Promises of an everlasting covenant with David are enlarged to include God's people. The former word has gone forth and has not returned empty ... Our thoughts are not God's thoughts, the prophet reminds us; and yet God's word, once delivered, maintains a sure continuity through time, accomplishing what God had planned originally.” – Gene M. Tucker.

As the meal on which the multitudes had feasted in the wilderness may have become a meal of remembrance that pointed back to Isaiah's prophecy now fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the meal that our Lord gave his disciples on the night when he was betrayed has become a meal of remembrance for us. As we gather at the Lord's Table to receive the body and blood of Christ, the words of our Saviour call us to “*do this in remembrance of me,*” drawing us back to all that our Lord has accomplished for us through the giving of his body and blood so that we might receive “*forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.*” (*Small Catechism*).

- “It is in this life that is taken, blessed, broken, and given that Jesus Christ wants to make us participants. Therefore, while breaking bread with his disciples, he said, ‘Do this as a memorial of me’ (Luke 22:19). When we eat bread and drink wine together in memory of Christ, we become intimately related to his own compassionate life. In fact, we *become* his life and are thus enabled to re-present his life in our time and place. Our compassion becomes

a manifestation of God's compassion lived out through all times and in all places." – Henri Nouwen.

While there are special meals that become meals to remember because of what we experienced at those tables, every meal can become memorable when we remember that the food that is set before us comes from our loving God who showers all blessings upon us *"out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all. For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."* (Small Catechism). As those who shared miraculous feedings may have remembered the promises of God's abundant blessing in that meal, may we remember God's blessings for us in the daily bread God provides for us as we remember the blessings of Christ's death and resurrection that are ours as we come to the Lord's Table to eat and drink *"in remembrance of me."*

Amen.