

Pentecost 9, 8.2.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

“You give them something to eat”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. The readings for today remind us that God is compassionate to all people, satisfying our needs and opening our hands to serve others. God feeds us with word and sacrament, so that we can feed others. God has set us in a creation teeming with life and enough food and produce for all people, and yet there is massive disparity, poverty, and hunger. Jesus’ words to his disciples, “*They need not go away; you give them something to eat*” are also hard words that challenge us. As followers of Jesus, we have been given faith that is to be active in loving service to our neighbor. The way of the world is “take care of yourself,” and if you don’t have enough, “tough luck.” Jesus, the bread of life, feeds us so that we might feed the world.

Today’s gospel reading begins just after Jesus has heard that his relative, John the Baptist, had been killed in prison. Though we don’t know the exact relationship between Jesus and John, in the Gospel of Luke we are told that their mothers were “relatives.” Indeed, Mary visited Elizabeth while she was pregnant with John, staying for about three months. So there was a close family relationship between Jesus and John. When Jesus heard that John had been killed, he withdrew by boat to a deserted place by himself. So perhaps we can imagine Jesus’ feelings: his relative John had been murdered, the man who had baptized him in the Jordan River was dead, and so he probably wanted to be alone, to think, and to pray.

However, the gospel tells us that when people heard where Jesus was, they went to him, even to a deserted place. Jesus’ fame had grown and people walked on foot following the shoreline to where Jesus was. They brought their sick for healing, and Jesus had compassion on them and healed them. It had become evening in this deserted and out of the way place, and yet the crowds did not leave Jesus. It must have heartened Jesus, because he told his disciples that the crowds did not have to go away, *they* were to feed the crowd.

Yet the disciples were worried, saying, “*This is a deserted place and it’s late; send the crowds away into the villages to buy food for themselves.*” Jesus’s disciples displayed the all too familiar human attitude, “take care for yourself” and if you can’t - “tough luck.”

So Jesus said, “*They need not go away; you give them something to eat.*” Jesus put the

responsibility of feeding the crowd squarely with the disciples. Jesus was teaching his disciples, with the words, *“You give them something to eat.”* Jesus taught his disciples about service to others, and at the same time, Jesus gave them a “wonder,” a “sign” that demanded faith from the disciples, faith that they did not yet have.

There were only five loaves of bread and two fish, and the disciples had no vision for what faith in Jesus could do. So Jesus said to them, *“Bring them here to me.”* Looking up to heaven, Jesus blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples. Jesus was teaching the disciples, and what Jesus had blessed fed five thousand and more.

The miracles, as we call them, are really “signs” that point to the reality of God’s kingdom that only faith can grasp. Jesus’ words to his disciples, *“They need not go away; you give them something to eat,”* reveal the role that Jesus has in mind for his disciples, and us, in meeting the needs of the world. As followers of Jesus we will also need faith to perform signs of Jesus’ power.

The funny thing is that the word “miracle” does not occur in the Bible. The word “miracle” comes from the Latin translation, the Vulgate, which used the Latin word *“miraculum”* in translating the Hebrew of the Old Testament. However, in both Hebrew and Greek the words used are “wonders” and “signs,” which point beyond themselves to the source of the sign, to the power of God. Modern attempts to understand miracles are often motivated by a modern prejudice against anything that cannot be verified rationally, revealing a modern prejudice against the value of religion and faith, in general. However, the Bible helps us realize that *faith is another way of knowing*, and the signs performed by Jesus are meant to awaken faith in God.

Jesus says as much in John’s gospel after the feeding of the five thousand. In John’s gospel, the crowds came looking for Jesus afterwards because they had been fed. The crowds looked at Jesus as “the bread-king,” the one who could take care of their physical hunger. Jesus said to them, *“Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”* Then Jesus told them, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”*

Jesus’ blessing of the bread and fish, and feeding of the crowd are signs pointing to God’s compassion and love for all in need. As Psalm 145 reads, *“You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.”* God’s grace sustains us on our journeys through the wilderness of the world.

So Jesus' words, "*They need not go away; you give them something to eat,*" are also meant to challenge us to perform signs pointing to the power of God's kingdom present among us now. As you know, due to the pandemic, most churches remain empty these days. The pandemic has made it nearly impossible to gather together safely in large groups. So it amazes me that the shelves in our church hallway continue to be filled with food for the Loaves and Fishes ecumenical food pantry. St. Mark's Soup Kitchen continues to serve carryout lunches, and has also started to make even more lunches to help programs at Running Works for at risk and transient youth.

Last weekend St. Mark's youth and families made and delivered 70 lunches to a dorm run by "Roof Above" the new name of the Urban Ministry Center. For Easter and Fourth of July, the Kairos Prison Ministry delivered cookies, thousands of cookies, to Foothills Correctional Institute in Morganton. St. Mark's Social Ministry is also making a new financial gift to Refugee Support Services and Crisis Assistance.

For a church that is empty because of a pandemic, St. Mark's continues to perform "wonders" and "signs" that point beyond the building to a God who loves all people, to a God who does not want anyone to be forgotten. We even have anonymous people in the neighborhood who donate food because they support the work this church does. God opens our hands, helping satisfy need in the world around us.

In seminary I did my internship at a Lutheran church in Muscatine, Iowa, and I remember one day in confirmation class, a young person asked me, "Why doesn't God do miracles anymore?" "Like what?" I asked. "Like the feeding of the five thousand," one of them replied. I remember saying, "Miracles are what Christians do everyday when they help others." The real "miracle" is Jesus' body, the church. We do things that no one else does and expect no recognition for it. We do things that point away from ourselves toward hope in Jesus, the bread of life.

But people are funny, I remember talking about homelessness and violence, with someone, and immediately this person told me that no one had given them anything in life, and that people should just work harder and there would be less homelessness and violence in the world. We all have to work hard, that is not the point. Such language is completely unpersuasive to me because so many people live with the reality of evil, violence, and systemic injustice in the world. We live in one of the richest nations in the world with some of the most staggering poverty. The reality of hunger and poverty doesn't happen just because people aren't working hard enough - it's the way the world is -

evil exists. The real “miracle” to me, if I can call it that, is that there *is* poverty, when it is surrounded by so much wealth. If we have the power to help others, we should, because that is how Christ works signs and wonders in our midst.

Martin Luther once wrote that if you are powerful, you should not make the weak weaker by oppressing them, but you should make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. Jesus’ signs show us what we are to imitate: Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry. Jesus raised people up and empowered them.

Jesus did not remove hunger from the world, rather Jesus feeds his body with the bread of life - with grace - so we can feed others, so we can be signs of God’s power alive in the world – signs of God “satisfying the desire of every living thing.” The power Jesus and his kingdom dwell within us already. Each of us can be a living sign of Jesus’ power, here and now.

So for a while our church is empty. It will, of course, be full again, but in the meantime, people remain hungry in the world and this church continues to be a sign of God’s power. Use your power to help others. Use your power to raise up and defend the weak. Lord, knows the world will not do it. This is why Jesus has given his body, the church, the keys and power of the kingdom, to loosen the power of God’s mercy and love in the world.

Jesus told his disciples, “*You give them something to eat.*” Every Sunday I preach in an empty church, but that is ok, because I know that this church is listening to Jesus, and working out in the world, where it matters. Be signs of God’s power in the world. Let your faith be active in love, continue to open your hands for others. Amen.