

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Stirling
Sunday, August 6th, 2023

Fed up?

[based on Matthew 14:13-21]

Have you ever noticed how often food is involved in the stories of Jesus? As often as he was praying, he was sharing food. Late in his ministry, he even identified himself with bread and wine – staples in the Mediterranean diet, then as now.

Food - it nourishes, brings pleasure and comfort, fills us up – sometimes makes us too full. Yet, without food, we are cranky, confused. We might lose our way, become disoriented, lose balance. Food...it is basic, necessary, essential.

When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, they were given manna for food, nothing fancy, just filling. The people became so bored eating manna day after day that they complained to God, and yet, they were fed.

Today's gospel tells another story of food – lots of food. There is so much food, that they have some left over! This is not a banquet like the wedding in Cana from John's gospel, but food to tide one over, food for a journey, simple food - bread and fish.

This is not even a meal, really. It is food to just get by. The food of our gospel story is basic fill-the-hole-in-your-stomach food, something to take the edge off, something for survival.

The people on that hillside long ago were not friends and family gathered for an occasion, so much as people who wandered away from home, seeking Jesus.

We know this story as, "The Feeding of the 5,000", one of the miracles of Jesus. Those of us either enlightened or listening closely, know that it was many more than 5,000. The count was taken of the men, "Not including women and children." How many would that be altogether, do you think?

So, did it really happen as Matthew records? Where did the food come from? What did they do with the 12 baskets of leftovers? Questions like these are so often the focus of discussion of this story.

But is this even all that the story is about? There are many ideas about this story, many theories, from the conviction that it was an outright miracle of Jesus, producing multiple and more-than-sufficient fish and loaves, to the

idea that the people produced the food from their satchels when prodded to share. There is really no way to know.

But this may not be the whole point of the story, and however it happened, is this only a story about food? Consider again the story we have of Jesus from Matthew's gospel: "He left alone in a boat ...to a place where no one lived".

What we are not told in reading *just today's portion*, is that he was in a boat, withdrawing, because he had just learned of John's death.

John was his cousin...John had baptized him. It was not the best of times for Jesus. He was trying to get a moment of peace. And according to the gospel, when the crowds heard that he was near, that he was drawing apart, *"they left their towns and followed him. They went by land to the same place he went."*

So, he fed the crowds, and after he dismissed the people, he again went off by himself. He set out to do one thing, to get some space and some time away. This proved to be difficult for him, as we read in today's story.

Is this familiar to you? Rest, time apart, a few minutes alone, a break, some space – it's something that we all seek at the end of a busy day, at the close of a tiring week. Jesus was interrupted and responded, and then went on with what he was doing.

Parents recognize this dynamic, and so do clergy. People with demanding jobs, family obligations, social responsibilities – this dynamic is likely familiar to all of us. We get involved in what we are doing, and we do not want to be interrupted or distracted, and so we ignore what is nudging us for attention.

In the last month, Sherry and I have been to BC for our son's wedding. It was a wonderful distraction for us, time for us to be away from the busyness of our usual lives.

Several years back there were a series of television commercials sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons. One showed different scenes of children wanting attention: "Look what I made in school today!" and "I brought you flowers!"

There was another one, of a dog wanting attention from family members, and of people wanting attention and to spend time with others. In each case, people were distracted, busy, un-interruptible. In each case, the one seeking attention is ignored, put off. In each case, it is a missed opportunity for ministry, for witness to the loving grace of God.

This is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of life - the constant interruptions and inconvenience of answering a call and still trying to get anything done. Have you ever caught yourself saying, "I didn't get anything done today"? Think though! Didn't you see some people, make some phone calls, run an errand, send an email?

Even within the interruptions there can be interruptions. You are in a hurry to get out of the house, and you can't find your keys; you find your keys, lock the door, and the telephone rings; as you're rushing to your meeting, you realize that the car is out of gas, and then you remember that you have no money because you forgot to stop by your bank's ATM.

And so it goes. Have you ever had an experience like that? Such moments leave us vulnerable to a breaking-in of the Holy Spirit. Each point is a chance to find something lost, to greet a stranger, to learn something new. In short, it is an opportunity for grace, a chance to bear witness to the Christ in our midst, with all that that means.

Jesus withdrew and was constantly interrupted by people clamoring for attention: *Teach us! Heal us! Give us food! Prove yourself!* Lest you be tempted to think of ministry as limited to ministers, we *all* know there is always someone needing something, right?

Parents with children are used to being asked for attention... yes? You might be driving somewhere and stop to loan jumper cables. Perhaps you are walking down the aisle at the grocery store and pause to pick up a dropped box of cereal. A stranger might ask you for directions as you are hurrying back to your office, or the passenger next to you on an airplane is nervous about flying, when you had hoped to settle in for a nap.

These are the kinds of experiences common to all of us. A compassionate response, a helpful effort, "*ministry*" happens in the interruptions. You may like it, you may not – you probably experience a bit of each – but be on the lookout for such interruptions, because there may be something important happening. We tend to think of interruptions as limited opportunities, small moments, but they can grow into something we never imagined.

The gospel parables– the mustard seed, the pearl of great price, and so on – all these are stories of God's abundance. So, also, is this story of feeding many. Jesus had sought time apart, time for himself, quiet time. He was interrupted. And his response? With grace and care, he healed the sick, and he somehow found food for the hungry.

However it happened, all were fed. Five thousand men – not counting women and children! The faithful response to interruption models Jesus in a plenitude of grace. Yes, the story is about food. Consider though, that it is also about interruption, about blessing, about goodwill, about possibility.

Jesus fed not only their bodies, but their spirits. This is the message of our gospel story - allow for interruptions as opportunities to show Christ in the world. A joyous and generous response to a bothersome interruption is one of the great challenges – and opportunities – of the Christian life.

Now, the temptation is great – and thousands have succumbed to it – to try to explain away what happened that day, on a deserted stretch of land near the Sea of Galilee. Interpreters have tried to rationalize the resulting abundance of food. The reaction is understandable - it is frightening to stand in the real presence of the creative energy of God!

In order not to be afraid, we try to explain it according to the laws of nature, but we cannot. When the eternal enters the temporal with such force, our finite minds either close up or become arrogant. So, it does not help to argue about the word "*miracle*" when we are confronted with this story. What matters here is that they were all fed.

God, in Christ, takes what we have, blesses it, and works his goodwill through this blessing. God wants us to be fed, wants us to be whole, wants us to be nurtured and to nurture. Jesus sets an example for his church in this act of feeding the five thousand.

The living Christ wants us to take what we have and offer it to God, no matter how little it is, no matter how meager our resources are. When it comes to the needs of his people, God will not take no for an answer. God will bless, but the rest is up to us.

We bring the resources, and *we* do the work. It was the disciples who were asked to organize the people and who served the food that continued to increase because it was blessed by the loving energy of the Creator.

How can the church do less? First, we bring our weakness to Jesus, saying, "We cannot do it, Lord. The needs are too many." Then we answer his question, "*How much do you have?*" "Well, very little, five loaves and two fish." "Bring it here," he says. "It is enough." And he blesses it. Then, wonder of wonders, we discover that, yes, it *is* enough. It is enough and more than enough.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN