**“Of Loaves and Fishes”**

*Valley Presbyterian Church – August 5, 2018*

11th Sunday after Pentecost Psalm 145:10-18

Rev. John Wahl John 6:1-13

Let’s begin today by giving this miracle is due by using its full name: “The Multiplying of the Loaves and Fishes.” The full name is useful because it is at the heart of the miracle. It was certainly in Jesus’ power to create a lavish banquet for the crowd from scratch. But Jesus did not come to perform parlor tricks. In all that he did, he was teaching a lesson; and this one involved elementary math. For, a million times nothing is still nothing. But a million times a small morsel is a feast. Jesus took these few loaves and fishes, blessed and broke them, and then gave them back in satisfying abundance.

Too many of us too often see the feast of abundance that God promises us as something which lies over a distant horizon. But Jesus did not come to take advance reservations for some banquet far in the future. Jesus is telling us to come to him in our want; that if we bring to him our meager scraps of faith, he will turn them into a feast of fulfilment. We need his grace right here, right now; for it is in his word, in our worship, in our fellowship, and in our outreach that we are fed.

Jesus knows full well that in the long run, eating and drinking is quite literally a dead-end. Any one individual meal can sustain us for only so long before we need to eat again. Likewise, the entire process of eating and drinking will only keep us going for so long, and then we die. The bread of this earth cannot keep us alive forever.

And so, what Jesus did on the mountainside that day – feeding those 5,000 people – was wonderful. It was a miracle and a sign of the kingdom. But it was not the kingdom. To get at the real reason Jesus had come among them, to solve the deeper problems of life and death, Jesus had to share with them something more than food – which is what he will go on to do in the latter part of chapter 6. There Jesus presents himself as the true bread of life. It is through this true bread that we can discover a new kind of life – eternal life.

In the middle of the 19th century, there was a group of people in America known as the Millerites – a Christian sect firmly convinced that the second coming of Jesus would take place in 1843. Of course, it did not happen, which set off what came to be known as “the Great Disappointment.” At least some of these Millerites, however, made the best of the situation by declaring that Jesus had returned but that it turned out to be an invisible, spiritual advent. And so, believing that they were living in an already-present kingdom, these “Adventists” decided that as part of their new identity, they should invent alternative foods as a sign of no longer being fully in this world. So, one preacher named Sylvester Graham invented a new kind of cracker for his congregation to eat – the Graham Cracker. Cold breakfast cereals, including something new called the “corn flake,” were also perfected by Adventist devotee John Harvey Kellogg in a spiritual community located in Battle Creek, Michigan.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Food and spirituality have long been yoked together, but aside from observing periods of fasting, no religious group proclaims that they will never eat anything again. We all know that we must eat and drink to live. We can’t go more than a few days without water, or a few weeks with no food. Many faith-based organizations – like *Rise Against Hunger,* who was our partner in last fall’s food packaging event – work nobly every day to get food to the world’s starving people.

We know that we need food to live. Those of us who are blessed enough to not have to worry about our food have the luxury of being able to enjoy creation’s bounty in all of its wonderful variety. We need food; we appreciate it. The crowds around Jesus on that long ago day were no different. They were hungry, Jesus fed them, and they appreciated him.

And yet, there has been – and still is – so much confusion, misunderstanding, and even disappointment about what the sacred Christian meal – the sacrament of holy communion – means. It holds a central place in the life of every church, and yet among so many different traditions, it can also be very confusing – who is welcome? what is being offered? how does it impact us? Saint Augustine, writing in the 4th century, described the connection between the sacraments and our daily lives as “visible words.” These were to be the visible, physical counterpoints to the preaching and teaching of the church. The sacraments are the embodiment of the gospel – proclaimed and heard – in physical form; given shape in the bread and cup. They serve as physical reminders of what we have heard and what we believe because we are physical creatures, such that remembering and believing can be hard.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The sharing of the gospel – verbally and physically – involves telling the truth. And, as Frederick Buechner says, the truth is:

…bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that is he is evil in the imagination of his heart…That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding, to be sure, but also bled for. That is comedy (the good news.).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The gospel is tragedy before it is comedy, bad news before it is good. It often is not what we want really want to hear. The sacraments tell us first the difficult truth about ourselves, and only then tell us the glorious truth about God’s loving response and abiding love for us.

And of all the truths the sacraments tell us about ourselves, the first is that we ultimately are not in control. It almost seems like we don’t need to be told this. After all, an illness, loss, or tragedy – great or small – reminds us of just how precarious life can be. And yet, it is tempting to believe otherwise: to try to carefully arrange our life and thus delude ourselves into believing that we can be masters of our own fate. And so, the gospel first must reveal the difficult news that we are not always in control.

Thus, when we come to be fed at the Lord’s Table, we come on God’s terms, not ours. Christ appears to us in Holy Communion in body, physically; first to say “no” to our desire to be in total control, and to the people we wish we were or wish everyone thought we were; so that we might then hear Christ’s “yes” to the place we find ourselves and to the person we actually and already are, the person for whom Christ gave his life and to whom he now gives the gift of his body and blood.

Therefore, what is difficult, and often misunderstood, about communion is, in the end, pretty simple: we have had and have nothing to do with it, not really. Like the loaves and fishes that were multiplied by Jesus on the mountainside, transforming a small morsel into an amazing abundance, we are merely recipients. It is God’s action of mercy and grace alone; and so, we can neither take credit for it nor control it.

The good news, the comedy, is that we are invited to come to church, and to the Lord’s Table, as our ourselves. This may seem like a simple thing, and yet in so many parts of our lives we feel like we must pretend, put on a good face, not let others in, hold back our vulnerability and honesty lest we wallow in the fear of rejection. We are invited to come here as we really are, holding nothing back, willing to risk it all; for it is the Lord himself who invites us to share this meal, the Lord himself who nourished us with his own body, the Lord himself who calls us to new and eternal life. We are invited to come as we are, and while we may not always be in control, we are loved for who we are.

The message of the meal is that God loves us; and that Christ is literally the embodiment of that love. Where we see meager scraps, he creates abundance. Where we see emptiness and loss, he creates fulfillment and joy.[[4]](#footnote-4) In his love, we are nourished and protected. Come to his feast and experience the true bread of life. His invitation is to a feast that never ends. AMEN.

1. Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Lose, “Visible Words” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As quoted by David Lose [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Sellery, “Come to the Feast” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)