

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
July 29 & August 2, 2020 8th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A Matthew 14:13-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Last week in our gospel text we heard Jesus teach about the kingdom of heaven. He said the kingdom is like small and ordinary things which grow into gifts for others. A mustard seed grows into a great bush that provides a place for birds to make nests in their branches. And yeast transforms dough into bread to feed a family.

Today, Jesus moves from describing what living in the kingdom of heaven is like to actually living the kingdom life. And he does that using what seems like insignificant amounts of ordinary bread and fish. But we need to back up a little to get the full effect of this miracle as told in Matthew's gospel.

The passage begins with Jesus trying to find some time and a place to grieve the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. I appreciate these occasions when we witness Jesus experiencing the fullness of human life, including grief. A pastor friend of mine taught me that death is never convenient. It interrupts our lives and it is important to acknowledge the grief that accompanies a loss like death.

But we also know that the world does not always stop for us when death and grief interrupt. We still need to feed our families and do our work and go where we are needed. And as much as Jesus may have wanted to take more time away, when he saw the crowds following him—probably carrying their sick family members, hobbling on make-shift crutches, and yearning for a word of hope—he had compassion for them.

Jesus didn't just feel sorry for them. The word that is translated as "having compassion" means a gut-wrenching, visceral reaction that moved him to respond.

I think about the number of times I have driven through the homeless districts of a big city and wished someone would do something for those who live on the streets.

I have heard the stories of children in need of foster care and pray that others would hear the call to open their homes to them.

I watch the news, and the distress of the world seems so overwhelming that I turn off the TV and return to my comfortable life.

Now I know that there are people who are moved to act in the face of large-scale problems and I am thankful for them! The word I hear today is that it was not the compassion of the disciples that made the miracle happen, it was the compassion of Jesus that made the difference.

Jesus shows us that God sees the troubles and the brokenness in the world. Jesus' compassion moves him to heal and mend and comfort—even, and especially, when we cannot see how anyone can make a difference at all.

Now, God had fed thousands of people in the wilderness before. God could have sent swarms of quail in the evening and sweet, dewy manna in the morning as he did with the Israelites back in the time of the Exodus. But in Jesus, God was up to a new thing.

This time, Jesus took what seemed like not enough food and he blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the crowd.

Let's talk about that food, the five loaves of bread and two meager fish. You may have noticed that there are some numbers that tend to be repeated again and again in the Bible. One of the them is the number seven. It's the number for the days in Genesis, chapter one, in which God created the heavens and the earth. The 7th day of the week is named in the 3rd Commandment as a day of Sabbath rest, a day dedicated to the Lord.

There are seven churches addressed in John's Revelation at the end of the Bible. And Jesus taught his disciples that we are to forgive our neighbor not just seven times, but 70 times seven.

The number seven in the Bible represents perfection or completion, the fullness of God's activity. The disciples brought to Jesus five loaves of bread and two fish—seven food items. They thought it would not be enough, but for Jesus, these seven items were not just enough they were a perfect amount to accomplish God's work in abundance, so that there would be twelve baskets of food leftover!

As Jesus blessed the fish and bread he also blessed and equipped the disciples to engage in God's work in the world.

Several years ago, our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, adopted the tagline "God's Work. Our Hands." Maybe you've seen these t-shirts with the logo on them. Congregations across the country have participated in an annual "God's Work. Our Hands." Day of service in their communities or they wear their t-shirts anytime they are about the work of God in the world. We have several of them in various sizes and we've worn them a few times, in case you ever want to borrow one!

Sometimes the needs in the world are so large and we seem so ill-equipped, so unprepared, with so few resources that it just doesn't seem worth it to even try to tackle them.

Let's imagine those disciples distributing the food to the thousands on that hillside. The twelve of them had to carry one basket at a time. And every time their basket was empty, they went back to Jesus to get another one.

We can easily see the struggles of the world and feel overwhelmed as the disciples did. Send them away. Someone else can take care of them, or let them go where there are more resources so they can take care of themselves. Jesus says to us, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

It is the compassion of Jesus that fuels our own compassion. Jesus takes us—our talents, our resources, and our hearts—and breaks us open to fill us with God's compassion for the world. Then we are blessed and given what we need to bring God's gift of life to others—one basket, one step, one moment at a time.

Does any of that sound familiar? In the Sacraments—the holy acts of God—God takes us in Holy Baptism naming us as beloved children and blesses us to be servants of God's love. Then we are fed with Christ's own body and blood in our Holy Communion, so that we become vessels of God's love to be given to the world.

What are some of the worries in the world that seem too overwhelming these days?

How is Jesus breaking open your heart with compassion for even one of those struggles?

What one small thing might Jesus be calling you to do that he can bless and multiply so that God's love can be poured into the pain and suffering of the world to bring peace and healing and comfort?

Jesus blesses us to bring the power and presence of God to a hurting world.

We have enough. We are enough. In fact, we are more than enough.

We are complete with God's abundant love and grace.

Thanks be to God! Amen