

Message for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (8/2/2020)
Matthew 14:13-21

“Can God spread a table in the wilderness?”

That’s the hungry cry of the Israelites as they struggle along their desert journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Rescue from enslavement and fresh water from the deep are not enough. “Can God [also] spread a table in the wilderness?” they cry out in the version of the story in Psalm 78, “Can God also give bread, or provide meat for God’s people?”¹ The provision of food is a perennial sign of love, a means of sustaining and strengthening those in our care. So, God’s answer to the people’s question is, of course, yes. God spreads a feast of manna and quail in the desert, and the Israelites eat their fill.

The people’s plea for food is presented as an act of rebellion against God, a faithless complaint. But, is it, really? Doesn’t Jesus instruct us to appeal to God for our daily bread, too,² mindful that we, like the Israelites, depend entirely on God’s generosity for our sustenance? Despite our prayer, doesn’t the human heart in times of trouble wonder whether or not God will in fact attend to our needs? And, don’t we have the right to ask why 820 million people around the world are still hungry today?

“Can God spread a table in the wilderness?”

Jesus’ answer to that question is also yes. Drawn away from Galilee and across the sea by the news of John the Baptizer’s execution, he is nevertheless

¹ Psalm 78:19-20. See Exodus 16, Numbers 11.

² Matthew 6:11.

attended by the many who are drawn to him. “When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.” If the people go with Jesus, so do their needs. And, that becomes even more apparent as the day wears on, and the disciples realize the crowd’s need for an evening meal: “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late,” they tell Jesus, “send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” There’s nothing malicious in this suggestion; just the assumption that the people should be responsible for their own nourishment. ***Let each one be subject to the prevailing system of distribution, the disciples propose, that is, every man for himself, besides women and children.***

And, this Jesus rejects: “They need not go away,” he replies, “you give them something to eat.” His disciples must be stunned. Notice that they don’t question the validity of Jesus’ command; of course, feeding hungry people is consistent with his project to bring about the reign of God. But, it’s a question of means. “We have nothing here,” they say, “nothing... but five loaves and two fish.” And, how can such meager resources possibly satisfy everyone’s hunger? The enormity of the need overwhelms their sense of agency.³

Jesus says, “Bring them to here to me.”

We all know what happens next. It’s a foundational story, so important to the early followers of Jesus that it’s the only miracle included in all four Gospels. But, why? Is it because this episode is proof beyond a reasonable doubt of Jesus’

³ Dock Hollingsworth, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 311.

divine prowess, a public stunt to move the multitudes to faith? God's will is certainly evident here. Still, the Feeding of the Crowds is so much more than an instance of miraculous provision. This account is so significant because it's an exemplar of the gospel, or, to quote one interpreter, "a symbolic representation of the meaning of the Christ-event as a whole."⁴ **Jesus embodies the compassion of God, defying the disciples' mindset of deficiency and attesting to the sufficiency of God's grace.**⁵ And, that grace has material consequences. Hungry people are filled with good things, and there is **more than enough for everyone.** "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?" The Feeding of the Crowds is the gospel story's response.

And in this way, it's a counter-narrative to the myth of scarcity that so often shapes our outlook. There is never enough to go around, is there? Never enough worthiness; never enough justice; never enough resources, material, emotional, or human. Even what little we have we underestimate: *We have nothing here*, we echo the disciples' complaint, *certainly not enough to make a difference.*

Jesus says, *Bring it here to me.*

The miraculous feeding implies that Christ is capable of blessing and multiplying the impact of our contributions, no matter their size. But, this story also dares us to expand our vision of what's possible. "Jesus transforms our humble offerings into more than we could have dreamed,"

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XIII, 326.

⁵ See <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-8-2/2117#resources>.

another interpreter observes, “but it is also true that Jesus is calling upon us to dream bigger.”⁶

“Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” Friends, what is our answer?

Many of you have contributed to a new feeding ministry in Puyallup that emerged in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Since it hasn’t been safe for our unhoused neighbors to gather indoors, most of their outlets for food have disappeared. Still, daily midday meals are available at New Hope Resource Center, and our congregation has taken responsibility for Wednesdays. The program is currently serving up to fifty-five people. “There’s not much I can do,” Barb King told Nancy Jo Armstrong amid their efforts to collect and deliver food to New Hope, “so I want to keep doing what I can.”

Dear church, that is an offering of loaves and fish. There’s no doubt that it’s God’s desire that hungry people be fed, and that we partake in the feeding. What’s more, it’s God’s promise that there is enough to go around, even when we can’t see it. **The meager meal we share today is a foretaste of the feast to come; indeed, all our feeding and feasting is done in hopeful expectation of the great banquet in the end, when God’s reign will finally come on Earth as in heaven and none will go hungry.**

⁶ Hollingsworth, 313.