

"Just Five Loaves and Two Fish"

Matthew 14:13-21

July 31, 2005

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Prayer.

It is said that too much of a good thing isn't good.

I was pleased to read this past week the lead article from the July / August Circuit Rider magazine, a periodical for United Methodist clergy, titled "The Church's Task of Moral Formation," by bishop Timothy W. Witaker of the Florida Episcopal Area. The essence of bishop Witaker's article is that Christians are talking morality, but acting as if morality doesn't matter, which undermines our credibility.

Critics of Christianity rightly observe the fact that the Church focuses largely on justifying grace, ignoring the laws that God has given us. The Church is successful at helping people feel good, but we must ask the question, is the church effective in enabling people to be good?

The focus with our Jewish sisters and brothers is adherence to Torah; learning, teaching, obeying, following the laws God has given us. Whereas the emphasis with Christianity is upon God's forgiveness. We supply all the justifying excuses for a-moral behavior. It is an attitude of "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow

we are assured of being forgiven.

Taken to its extreme, the theological term is "anti-nomianism" - the proclamation of the "free grace of God in Jesus Christ in a way that says or implies that God's grace makes void the moral law of God." Consider how many sermons you have heard in your lifetime, or, how many sermons I have preached over the course of my 20 years, with a title something like "You are Accepted"? Some call this liberalism; whatever it is called, it may be the disease that is wasting away the mainline Protestant denominations in America.

"Grace may be free, but it isn't cheap," I recall my father telling me.

At the other end of the spectrum are the prudish, moral conservatives. No drinking, no smoking, no dancing – no life! When exposed, as all of us ultimately will become before the judgment of God, all of Christianity takes the fall. For example, Bill Bennett publishing books on morality, only to be exposed as a gambler. Jimmy Swaggert preaching about the wages of sin, only to be exposed as an adulterer. Perhaps the Al Sharptons and Jesse Jacksons of this world are meant to cancel out the fallen fundamentalists!

So where does this all leave us?

It leaves us with a Gospel lesson for this morning that emphasizes the extravagant grace of God. In light of my preceding statements; warning lights and alarms should be going off! Danger! Danger! Danger!

The joy of a free meal needs to be tempered with the fact that at least a couple of people in the crowd had the responsible sense to pack a lunch. Thank God Jesus had at least 5 loaves and 2 fishes to work with!

Let us feel some compassion for Jesus. He had just learned the news that his predecessor, John the Baptist, had been beheaded while being held in prison. Talk about prisoner abuse! He was beheaded at the command of the civil authority, Herod. Hearing the news, Jesus withdraws by boat to a quiet place to grieve. But the crowds won't let him go. They follow him on shore, waiting for him to land. Their tenacity eased his heart, and he reached out in "compassion for them and cured their sick." (Matthew 14:14).

Let's face it, the motive of most of the people in the crowd was selfish. "Heal me, Jesus!" "Do something for my loved one, please!" "I'm desperate, Jesus. Won't you help?" They were so obsessed with their selfish needs, most left their house that day without even thinking where their next meal would come from. While

some might interpret their actions driven by faith – that Jesus could heal them – others might conclude their actions were driven by selfish greed.

I am heartened to know that there were at least a few people in the crowd who planned ahead and packed a lunch.

True to form, Jesus meets the needs of those who seek him, against the better advice of his disciples. He heals their sick. He multiplies the bread and fish to feed the entire crowd. He not only meets their needs, but he exceeds them, with lavish abundance – after feeding 5,000 men and their families, there were twelve baskets of leftover bread! Truly, grace is free and abundant.

Jesus is consistent, after all! When Jesus tells the story about the Samaritan who fell among robbers, was beat up and left for dead, he tells about the one who rescues him. He binds his wounds, takes him to medical care, and pays his bill. He is the dream of modern day hospital accounting departments! And, oh, if there are any additional expenses, he will return and pay those, too! God's grace is free and abundant.

When Jesus tells the story of the young man who takes his share of the inheritance and squanders it on sinful living, Jesus tells us about the father who waits for his son's return. He watches the road, far down the road, until he lays eyes on his penitent son. The father runs to his son, joyfully puts a cloak and ring upon him, and throws him a feast, in spite of the objections of his elder son, roasting the best calf. O my, is God's grace ever free and abundant!

It's no wonder the majority of the crowd failed to pack a lunch when they went out the door this morning. The responsible, disciplined lifestyle isn't on their minds. They have needs for Jesus to meet.

I suppose Jesus could have fed the crowd simply starting with nothing – ex nihilo, like God created the world, out of nothing. Instead Jesus uses the five loaves and two fishes as the initiating catalyst for God's miraculous multiplying act.

Our Gospel lesson for today is a great miracle story, and we should be drawn to it because of God's abundant grace and because of its Eucharistic echo. But, and this is a big “but,” we should also be drawn to it because of the few who did the responsible, moral, disciplined act – thinking ahead, preparing for the future, bringing with them food for the day.

I believe this fine, narrow line is where God may be calling us to lead our lives

today. We must pay attention to moral formation. We must value the effort of righteous living. Because the lives we lead is a reflection upon the Savior we love. It is as simple as that.

This past week, I was encouraged by a conversation I had with a friend. She told me that her daughter had made a professional decision to do the right thing, to act ethically, even though it ended up personally costing her thousands of dollars. She was right to be proud of her daughter.

Each of us face critical, defining moments in our lives where we are tempted to ignore the law God has given us, to sit on our hands of Christian ethics, to bite our moral tongues, and to do something we know is absolutely irresponsible and wrong, based on the excuse that God's grace is free and forgiveness is never withheld.

Character is defined and built – Christian character is defined and built, when we hold firm and stand strong for the moral choice, the right decision, the righteous pathway, such that, by our actions we give glory to God.

I believe Jesus calls us to lead a balanced, disciplined life- to live according to God's laws to the very best of our ability, knowing that, when we fall short of perfection – as we are all bound to do – it will be the abundant, extravagant grace of God that will save us.

That grace is evident in the Samaritan's parable, in the Prodigal parable, and in today's miracle story. That amazing, abundant grace is tasted and experienced at the Eucharistic table. It is unselfishly demonstrated by a death on a cross, and confirmed by an empty tomb.

God's grace is amazing, abundant, and free. But it isn't cheap.

Someone has to bring the bread and fish. Make certain that it is you and me.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.