

In Nomine Iesu

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity 2022

What's the difference between feeding 5,000 and feeding 4,000? – Mark 8:1-9

“In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them, “I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar.” Then His disciples answered Him, “How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?” He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven.” And He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and they set them before the multitude. And they had a few small fish; and having blessed them, He said to set them also before them. So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments. Now those who had eaten were about four thousand. And He sent them away. And immediately He got into the boat with His disciples and came to the region of Dalmanutha.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Author of our rest. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ.

So, why did Jesus feed yet another multitude in the wilderness? The simple answer is that the 4,000 were as hungry and endangered as the 5,000. So, He miraculously fed them too ... to drive home the truth about the promises God makes to us. The deeper answer is that we all worry about the needs of daily life. Fathers and mothers, even Christian fathers and mothers, often worry about where they will find what they need to support their families. They worry because simply living your life as a follower of Christ can bring difficulties that those who don't follow Him do not experience. Obviously, if the people St. Mark tells us followed Jesus far out into uninhabited country had not done so, had they just remained home, they would not have faced this danger. To put it in a modern context, it is easier and costs less to stay home from church than to go to church. That's why a lot of people don't go. So Jesus, by feeding a second multitude, reminded His followers of the truth of what He first promised in His first sermon, the sermon on the mount, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. **But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness**, and all these things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

And there is probably yet another reason He fed this other multitude that He led out into the wilderness.

I

If we look at the events leading up to the feeding of the 5000, we see that they all concern the newly chosen twelve who would accompany Jesus throughout His ministry, and after His ascension to heaven, would go to every nation and preach the gospel. But what led up to the feeding of the 4000 very much concerns the people who would hear, believe, and follow those future apostles. In other words, everyone who follows Jesus needed to know that His words of promise, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you,” were given to them as well. Jesus had purposely led this huge crowd out into the wilderness unprepared, because He who feeds the birds of the air and fish of the sea, who opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living creature, did so to show them where to place their trust. His words of forgiveness and life, eternal life, had drawn them out into the wilderness and now placed them in danger of physical death. Here they would learn to trust Him for this too.

Jesus told His disciples: “I have compassion on the multitude.” Their response might have been: “How is that so, Lord? Why didn’t you tell us before it was too late, before we left? Now even two hundred denarii worth of bread isn’t enough. How can such a crowd be satisfied out here in the middle of nowhere? What can we do now?”

God in His wisdom turns the world’s wisdom upside down. His compassion is not just powerless, bleeding-heart sympathy. It is not like so many programs today, designed to help most of all the ambitions of the authors of the program. No, God’s compassion is a sincere and lasting love for the world He made. It is a genuine concern for the ongoing reality of man’s sin and its consequences. It was this compassion that caused our Lord to bring His hearers into these dire straits. But the reality was that they would be just as helpless if they were home snugly tucked away in comfortable beds with full bellies and still fuller pantries. There they might think they were in control, just as we do ourselves when we have money in the bank and a regular check coming in, when we are feeling good and everything seems to be going our way. But there in the wilderness, with heat shimmering on the horizon all round them, sweat stinging their eyes and dryness parching their throats, grumbling bellies, sore and tired feet, crying children, wailing babies, far from home and safety, they could feel their helplessness. The hunger that gnawed at the 4000 woke them up to their real frailty. They must eat or die. There was no place to turn.

The words of Jesus that had so lifted them out of their everyday existence that they forgot all and just followed the Teacher out into this seemingly godforsaken place, now seemed to evaporate. In contrast to Jesus and His calm confidence in God, the Father and Creator, they were afraid. They felt the nearness of starvation and death. They knew then and there the fear of their ancestors who left behind the apparent safety of Egypt to find themselves in the barren wilderness of Sinai with only Moses standing between them and death. Just then the Lord provided, as He always does – as He did during the Exodus (that is why those stories were told them as children!) – and through God’s goodness all 4000 were fed and strengthened, and by His grace many realized who miraculously provided them food to eat where there was none. They grasped that God’s promise to Moses was fulfilled, “I will raise up for them a **Prophet like you from among their brethren**, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.” (De 18:18) This is the Prophet, the Savior who was to come. His words of life and salvation led us out here. His goodness will preserve us in body, and His mercy will save our souls.

II

In these United States in this year of our Lord 2022, we do not know the fear Israel felt in the wilderness of Sinai. We have not - except perhaps because of our own foolish choices - experienced the nearness of starvation the 4000 knew. In fact, we Americans are more threatened with obesity than starvation, even in difficult economic times, such we have now with raging inflation and recession that waits at the door with unknown consequences. Yet as a nation we find little time for the God who created us and still preserves us, and even less for the One He sent into the world to bear our sins.

But the reality is that in a way we are the frailest of God’s creatures. We cannot survive on raw and decaying meat or draw sustenance from grass or leaves. We are the only animal on the face of the earth that requires clothing for survival. We fear unfamiliar sounds in the night. We would never venture to lie down and sleep in the open as deer calmly do. What is more, we need each other to survive. We need to cooperate with each other just to put food on our table, to travel safely from one place to another, to be healed when we are sick, which is why the shocking and violent events of these last few years should terrify us all. Discord and disorder set loose among us will kill more than we can imagine, because we are weaker than we imagine. Yet despite our obvious weakness, we are the proudest of

creatures God made and - we think - the smartest. Yet a dog or cat knows and trusts the goodness of its master more than we. We rebel against God and His goodness, without which we could not survive. We think ourselves wise and shrewd, good and decent. We boast in the well-founded confidence and good sense we think we possess above all others.

But our confidence quickly evaporates in the dark of night when our car breaks down in an unfamiliar place. If our electricity fails or water no longer comes out of the tap, life is put on hold and we become almost non-functional. Or if our health is threatened, the world is suddenly a very frightening place. Yet all along the extent of man's great vulnerability has been evident. And it should be apparent for all to see in our failed marriages, our troubled and confused children, our pettiness toward this or that person, if we hadn't the shame to hide such things from each other. But if neighbors hear us fight with our spouses, see us deal poorly with our children, know that we covet what they have even as we take for granted all that we have, it is not so pretty a picture. It is a thin veil of respectability we hide behind. And a veil is all that it is. Because none of us has been the child of God we should be. None of us, had we been among the 4000 that day, would have had the calm confidence of Jesus, who truly was at peace with His Father, the Giver of all good things. We would have felt fear in our hearts when the gracious words of Jesus ceased, and we gazed at the wilderness around us and realized how much danger we were in.

The fact is we are always sinners and often fools. We live in a wilderness as threatening as any the 4000 gazed at that day. How shall we survive in this wilderness? Can we feel the emptiness within that cannot be satisfied by mere bread? Do we not hear the King of grace in our midst, who gave Himself for us, the spotless Lamb who endured the heat of God's wrath toward our sins, our ingratitude, our pride, our stubborn foolishness, all so that we would be spared? Dearly beloved of the Father, who wander in the wilderness of sin, listen to Jesus' words, not just in passing. No, follow Him through this wilderness listening, and you will find a satisfaction the world cannot give. You will find in Him a peace that passes all understanding. You will know the comfort of sins forgiven. Our Lord has promised each of us, both preachers of His word and hearers, that He will supply all that we need as we continue to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

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The truth is that life is a gift, a gift from God. Life is a gift that sin has complicated and corrupted. Life is a walk in an often well disguised wilderness, whose dangers are not apparent, but often become overwhelming before we can do anything but panic and fear. Life is a walk in the wilderness. And we are far from the home God intends for us. We can walk alone, depending on our own ability and good sense. But that would be foolish, and dangerous. Or we can walk through the wilderness of life, listening to our heavenly Father, who so loved the world that He sent His only Son into this wilderness to speak forgiveness and mercy to us. We can walk knowing that there is an emptiness inside everyone, a hunger we may suppress and ignore, but a hunger that remains with us until He who fed the 4000 feeds us with the bread of life. Come, walk with Him, listen patiently to Him. He will give you understanding. He will satisfy you. He will give you real wisdom. He will give you peace. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria