

A Feast of Five Loaves and Two Fish

In the name of him who feeds his Church with bread of life from heaven, dear friends in Christ: In the Gospel lesson two weeks ago we heard how Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs to do some practice preaching. It was time for them to get their feet wet, so to speak – no longer just disciples hearing from Jesus, but now also teachers sharing some of what he'd taught them. Now at the beginning of today's Gospel they've returned to Jesus in Capernaum after some weeks on the road, all of them thoroughly worn out. They find that in their absence, Jesus has been busy too. After all, he's at highpoint of his popularity. People are flocking to him by the thousands, drawn by his radically refreshing teachings and his ability to miraculously heal every form of illness and injury. The result is that in order to keep up with this steady flood of humanity, Jesus has been burning the candle at both ends. He's keeping a schedule that allows him almost no time for rest or even to eat. And this is what his disciples have returned to. Jesus sees that his men are physically and mentally exhausted. They can't go on like this. No doubt Jesus feels the strain himself, and so it is that early one morning before sunrise when the crowds will surely begin to gather again, he pulls his disciples aside and says, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." It sounds good to them. They load up the boat, and with Jesus aboard they set sail to a remote place on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Unfortunately, they don't make a clean getaway. Some early risers observe what they're doing and spread the word. So as the disciples blissfully sail toward a much needed mini-vacation, unbeknown to them, a vast crowd follows along the shoreline. No sooner have Jesus and the disciples come ashore at their supposedly secret hideaway, than they look up and see the multitude approaching. The hearts of the disciples sink. They look to Jesus, hoping that he'll say, "Quick, boys, back in the boat. We'll head south." But no. Jesus looks at the horde converging on them and sees that they are like sheep without a shepherd. They've come to him lost, confused, and afraid looking for guidance, for spiritual sustenance, for healing, and for his word of comfort. And he has compassion on them. He must, for he is the Good Shepherd who gives his very life for the sheep. There will be no rest for Jesus or for the disciples this day.

It's about noon when Jesus begins to teach the crowd. With his words he fills their hungry hearts with truths from above. It is a veritable feast for their souls. And as the hours of the afternoon pass by, they listen to him enraptured by his insights and awed by the direct authority with which he speaks. And no one's looking at their pocket sundials begrudging him the time. This is what they came for, and not one of them is disappointed.

Meanwhile, the disciples are growing concerned. They came to this out-of-the-way place to have a break from the crowd. So to begin with, they aren't very happy that all these needy and insistent people have so rudely imposed themselves on what was supposed to be their down time. But now, in addition to that, it's getting late. Surprised by Jesus' sudden departure and not knowing how far they would end up having to go, no one in the crowd thought to bring any food with them. So they've missed breakfast *and* lunch, and now it's coming on supper time. The disciples (no doubt hoping to be free of the crowd at last) approach Jesus and tell him, "Look, Lord, it's getting late, and we're out here in the middle of no place. Send these people away so they can buy food for themselves in the surrounding villages." And that's when Jesus answers with these astonishing words: "Oh, they don't need to go away. You give them something to eat."

“You give them something to eat”: Oh, I would love to have seen the expression on their faces when he said that. As it is we can only imagine their mouths hanging open as they stare at Jesus in stunned silence, trying to decide whether he’s joking or if he’s completely lost his mind. When they do manage to speak, they sound like the voters’ assembly of the typical Lutheran Church. Forget about the logistic problem of *finding* the food required, they jump straight to the far more important issue: how much it’s going to cost. “What? Should we go and buy 200 denarii’s worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” They don’t have that kind of money – nothing near it. And from the other accounts of this event we know even that wouldn’t be near enough to feed so many people. The disciples are certain that it can’t be done. They simply don’t have the means to feed so many people. At least, that’s what they think – and to the extent that they’re thinking in terms of their own natural abilities, they’re absolutely right.

“What have you on hand?” Jesus asks them. A *very* short inventory reveals the answer: “We’ve got five loaves of bread and two small fish.” And mind you, we’re talking about five of those little round pita loaves and a couple pickled herring. It sure doesn’t look like much. Indeed, “What are *these* among so many?”

And yet, in the hands of Jesus and blessed by him, this seemingly insignificant serving becomes yet another feast for the multitude. The disciples distribute to all as much as they want. Their baskets seem to have no bottoms. No matter how times they put in their hands, they find that there’s still more in there to give. *All* eat their fill and are satisfied. And twelve baskets full of leftovers are gathered up by the disciples and returned to the Lord.

It is indeed an impressive miracle that proves the divine power of Jesus to create; but if that’s all we took away from it, we’d be missing the main message. With the miracles of Jesus there is always a teaching point, a lesson to be learned that is illustrated by the miraculous sign. And in this case it’s not hard to figure out. You see, in the not too distant future Jesus will be heading to Jerusalem, there to be arrested, condemned, and crucified – his life given as the ransom for the sins of the world. On the third day he will rise again and appear to his astonished disciples. He will explain to them *again* God’s eternal plan of salvation – and this time they’ll understand it. And before he ascends into heaven, he will commission them to go forth declaring forgiveness of sins and eternal life in his name.

He will make them his under-shepherds. He will commit to them the care of his flock. And his charge to them will be the same as the one he gave them on that remote beach on the Sea of Galilee: You give them something to eat. And what have they got in their picnic baskets with which to perform this colossal feat? The same as before: five loaves of bread and two small fish.

What do I mean? Ask any Jewish person living in the first century what the number five stands for, and without hesitation he’d answer, “Five stands for the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses; that is, the Word of God.” By extension it refers to the entire Scripture. And that makes sense: bread and the Word of God are closely linked in Scripture: man does not live by bread alone; but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God. And the two small fish? Well, let’s go with the two *fleshly* means by which Christ nourishes those whom belong to him: the Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. That’s all the apostles had with which to feed multitudes. And by God’s grace and the blessing of Jesus they did it. And so did those who followed them, who for twenty centuries have been feeding the flock of God with nothing but these five loaves and two small fish.

And actually there's a little more going on with the numbers here, for together five and two make seven, which is a number that the Bible often uses to represent the Gospel and the Church. Remember that the seventh day, or the Sabbath, is the day of rest. We rest in Christ's accomplished work. Peter asks, "How many times should I forgive my brother who sins against me? Is seven times enough?" Jesus replies, "No, not seven; but seven times seventy." You've also got the seven churches of Revelation, which together represent the whole Church on earth. So, five and two, God's Word and Sacraments, make seven, the Church where the Gospel of Jesus is declared and where we receive rest from our labors and the forgiveness of sins. And when we've all dined on this miraculous bread of life from heaven and had our fill, what's gathered up are *twelve* baskets of remains, which – as the youth who went to the Higher Things Conference this year can tell you – is a number that represents the people of God. Think the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples. So the Lord sends out his under-shepherds with the Word and Sacraments, thereby he feeds and nourishes his Church, and in the end he gathers up a people unto himself. It's very nice the way this all works out ...

... That is, when it works like it's supposed to – the way the Lord designed it. Unfortunately that doesn't always happen. Why not? Well, there are any number of things that can go wrong; but taking our cue from today's Old Testament lesson, it sometimes happens that the Lord's appointed under-shepherds are not being faithful to their callings. In Jeremiah's day, those whose job it was to teach God's Word and lead public worship were failing. Simply put, they didn't trust the Words and Promises of God. And they were directing the hearts of the people away from the Lord to idolatry, to various pagan practices, to human reason, and to political or supposedly practical solutions to spiritual problems. They were also fleecing their flocks. They did the job for a paycheck, not because they cared about the people they served. And the result was as we heard: rather than feeding, gathering, keeping, and tending the flock of God, they were driving the sheep away and scattering them.

This is why the Lord says that he will bring those worthless shepherds into judgment, and give his people new, faithful shepherds who will serve them on behalf of the righteous branch of David – who is called the Lord our righteousness – by which, of course, he means the Savior, Jesus Christ. It's the fulfillment of this we see (in part) in today's Gospel, as Jesus is preparing his disciples for this very task. He's teaching them to feed his flock with just two things: the five loaves and two fish. That's all, nothing more; for in the hands of Jesus, that's always enough for a feast.

But not everyone believes that. Throughout history there have been many who thought that they needed to add something to God's Word and Sacraments to build and feed Christ's Church. They looked in that basket and said to themselves, "There's no way to feed so many with so little." And over the centuries this has given birth to various unfaithful religious traditions and practices; to such things as monasteries, pilgrimages, the worship of saints and angels, to all kinds of other things too numerous to name, but all driven by the same notion that something else is needed to make people more faithful and more spiritual – to make them better or more complete Christians. It does exactly the opposite. Rather than gathering and feeding the flock of God, such things direct hearts away from Jesus and his righteousness, and end up scattering the flock and destroying souls. And we're not immune to this. The temptation is always to doubt that the five loaves and two fish are enough to do the job. Among us it usually shows up as various fads, programs, and campaigns. They're set forth by people who say that we're going to make the church work better or more effectively with these new ideas rather than the ones the Lord has appointed and has promised to bless. And so we get wrapped up in stewardship drives and evangelism methods and accountable leadership models – because we

think the Word and Sacraments aren't enough and that we can do church better than Jesus himself.

Forget all that. My task, the task of every under-shepherd, is to take only those five loaves and two small fish and put them into the hands of Jesus and let him bless them; and he will, every time. As I sit down with a biblical text to prepare it for you, he will by his Spirit reveal the answers to such questions as: "What does this text say about you and me? How does it reveal our sin? How is it calling us to repentance?" And having done that, he goes on to reveal, "What does this text say about Jesus? How does it point to him, to his becoming flesh and dwelling with us, to his perfect life lived on our behalf, to his saving work for us on the cross, and to the power of his resurrection?" That's how even the briefest passage, or a handful of water, or a morsel of bread and a sip of wine become for you a feast for the soul. My task is to serve it up so that you are filled with the Lord our righteousness.

Your task is to expect that, to hold me and other pastors who serve you to that standard, and to hunger and thirst for the righteousness that Jesus gives. You are not to expect to be entertained or titillated, to have your ears tickled, or to be enraptured with fine speech or flowery prose. Don't look for programs or new methodologies. No, come here like those who so doggedly pursued Jesus to that remote Galilean beach. Come expecting to be fed. And you will receive from five loaves and two small fish a great feast. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!