

“You Give Them Something to Eat”

In the name of him who feeds us with the bread of life from heaven, dear friends in Christ. I'm willing to bet that most if not all of you know what it's like to be serving as the host for a meal and then getting caught short of supply. It happens when you throw a dinner party and you discover too late that one or more of your invited guests took it upon themselves to extend the invitation to several others without bothering to inform you, or when it's your turn to head up one of those extended family gatherings and you're not quite sure how many will show up so you base your guess on what happened the last couple of times – and then it turns out that you guessed *way* too low. It can also happen when you're just about to serve supper and your son or daughter suddenly bursts through the door leading a small army of ravenous teenagers and proudly announces that they've invited their entire sports team over for a bite – and, “I've told them all what a great mom (or dad) you are. This won't be a problem, will it?”

Now, depending on what you're serving and how many extra mouths you have to feed, it might not be too much of a problem. Like they say, you can always put a little more water in the soup or another handful of pasta on to boil. But other times it doesn't work so well, like when what you're having naturally comes in single serving size components and you only have on hand enough for the number you'd planned to serve, or when the number of unexpected guests far exceeds anything you can do to stretch the meal. At times like that you have to resort to plan B. Namely, shut down and put away what you'd planned to serve (or figure out a way to use it as an appetizer) and quickly order some pizza. Why? Because you don't want to be a poor host, that's why. You don't want to send people who are *your* guests away from *your* table hungry. It would make you look bad. It would probably make you *feel* bad too. So you do what you can to avoid it. This, incidentally, is why you usually have so many leftovers after you've served as the host for something: you were scared to death that you'd look ungracious, foolish, or stingy, or all three at once, if you came up short; so you *over* planned.

But the disciples of Jesus could have over planned until they were blue in face and they still would not have been prepared for the number of unexpected guests that Jesus directed them to feed in this morning's Gospel reading. Think about it: you're in the middle of no place – a grassy hillside on the deserted eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. There's not even a small village nearby much less a town or city large enough that it might have on hand the quantity of prepared food to deal with what you've got: a crowd consisting of five thousand men not counting women and children. So, what ... probably ten to fifteen thousand people all together? Maybe more? And Jesus nonchalantly turns to you and says, “You feed them. Give them all something to eat.” But, of course, the disciples hadn't *over* planned. They hadn't *planned* at all. They didn't even think to bring enough food to serve themselves a proper meal, and here Jesus was telling them to serve a multitude. They must have thought he was out of his mind—or rather, they must have thought that their worst nightmare had come true.

You see, Jesus had already dropped the hint earlier in the day that they might be called upon to feed all these people. One of the other evangelists tells us about it. As we heard in this morning's text, Jesus and the disciples had hoped to have a little

getaway. So, they got into a boat and sailed for a deserted place; but huge crowds of people kept following along the beach. Finally, it became clear that there was going to be no quiet time alone for them. So, they went ashore and as the crowd approached, Jesus turned to one of his disciples and asked him where they might buy food for all these people. At the time, the disciple sort of brushed off the question by saying it would cost a small fortune to buy enough bread for each person to have even a little bite. He knew that they didn't have that kind of money, nor was there any place around where they could buy that much food even if they did have the money. Even so, Jesus had planted the seed of the idea that somehow, they were going to have to manage it. And I'm sure that this disciple expressed his concern about what Jesus had said to the others. So, all day long while Jesus is teaching they've got this worry floating around in the back of their minds – that they're going to be called upon to serve as hosts for a massive meal – and there's no way in the world they're going to be able to handle it. And by now it's getting pretty late. Even if the crowd left this moment, they'd all be soon stumbling around in the dark, tired and hungry, trying to find their way back to wherever they came from; but at least then they wouldn't be the disciples' concern anymore. But Jesus just keeps on teaching the crowd like he hasn't got a care in the world – like he's counting on the disciples to come up with a solution to this problem. And the later it gets, the more their worry grows.

Finally, the disciples can take it no longer. At sunset they come to Jesus begging him to send the crowd away. It's a problem they don't want to have to deal with. They simply don't have the means. "Be reasonable Jesus. Don't lay the burden of feeding all these people on us. We can't do it. Besides, it isn't *our* problem. It's theirs. They put themselves in this situation. Let them deal with the consequences."

And I suspect that most of us would naturally sympathize with the disciples in this case. If any of us had been there, and not knowing about the miracle that's coming, we'd be thinking exactly the same thing: "It's not my problem. It's theirs. And I can't help them anyway. I don't have enough for myself, so I certainly don't have anything to share with them." It only makes sense.

But let me suggest that there's something else going on here. Quite apart from the miracle that's about to take place when the loaves are multiplied, what's being revealed in this story is the stark difference in attitude that Jesus has toward the crowd as compared to that of his disciples. For the disciples all these hungry people are an inconvenience. They're an irritation – an impossible problem that they wish would just go away. "First, they robbed us of our much needed little retreat and time of rest, and now they're taking away our patience and peace of mind. These people and all their needs are for us a burden much too heavy to carry."

Ah, but from the very beginning we're told that when Jesus saw the crowd coming to him "he had compassion on them". Compassion: that's an interesting word. Literally it means "to suffer with". The Greek word that's been translated "compassion" is even more emphatic. It refers to that sinking feeling you get deep inside the pit of your stomach when you see something bad happening to someone you care for. We might say "gut wrenched". But what it means is that for Jesus the crowd's problems are his problems. Their needs are his needs. For him it can never be "them and us"; it's always just "us". That's why he gave up his time of rest to attend them, and why he spent the whole day teaching them. They needed what he had to offer, and he gave it to them. He couldn't imagine doing anything less. He couldn't have said, "Sorry, I'm on vacation."

I don't have time for you now. So, go home and don't bother me now." And don't imagine that it was because Jesus is God's Son that he had some kind of super energy hidden away that helped him keep going. No. He didn't use his divine power for his own benefit. He never did. He lived on earth *as a man*. And on this particular day he was a man who was bone weary and dog tired from constantly taking care of the needs of the crowds. Still, he couldn't imagine sending anyone – even thousands of people who had imposed themselves upon him – away from his table hungry—either in spirit or in body. He couldn't have done that: he was a good host. And he wanted his disciples to be good hosts too. That's why he directed them to feed all these people.

What follows, as we heard, is the miracle of the multiplying loaves and fishes, which is pretty straight forward. It's an event that proves Jesus' divine power and that reminds us that he is the same Lord who miraculously fed his people Israel for forty years in the desert with manna, the bread from heaven. It reminds us too of how in the hands of Jesus, and with his blessing, what seems to be very little can become a great deal indeed: enough to feed a multitude. And it's worth noting that Jesus used his disciples to distribute the food. So, you can picture them moving through the crowd, each one holding one of the small lunch-box sized baskets that people used to carry back in those days. And every time they reach their hand in, they pull out more. There's a seemingly endless supply nourishment right at the tip of their fingers.

But as remarkable as the miracle is, what's even more important is the lesson Jesus teaches his disciples by it—both his disciples way back then and the ones he has today (that's us). It's the lesson of compassion, which is exemplified by Jesus himself – sure, in his interrupting his time for rest and reconstitution to teach all these people and in feeding them with the miraculously created loaves and fishes; but even more importantly, in the mission that brought him to this earth in the first place. God looked down from heaven above and saw a whole world of lost people, people in sadness and misery, and headed for an eternity of suffering in hell. And make no mistake; they were people very much responsible for getting themselves in the terrible situation they were in.

We were such people. But the Lord simply could not have looked the other way or said, "It's their problem. They'll just have to figure a way out of it themselves." He couldn't do that because God is love. He couldn't do that because even though we were his enemies, he is a good host. We were the worst kind of party-crashers, and he decided to treat us as his welcome guests. He had *compassion* on us. He made our needs his needs. He made our suffering his suffering. He did it when he sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin. And now we are the beneficiaries of his great compassion. We've received the free gift of forgiveness and new life in him. Even today he is serving as our host. He's taking care of all of our needs for soul and body. He's feeding us with the food of this earth and more importantly he's feeding us with the bread of life from heaven, which is the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And now he directs you to join him in serving as host. He invites you to see the people of this world the same way he does: with compassion. He invites you to do for the other people in our community the same thing you would naturally do for an unexpected guest in your home: attend their needs. See to their comfort. Give them something to eat.

But you say, "Now hold on a minute here. It was all very nice for the disciples when they had to feed all those people: they had Jesus to whip up all the food they

needed. He isn't going to do that for me." That's probably true. But then, he's not going to send you 5000 people to feed either. He's going to send you that family down the street that's having a hard time making ends meet. He's going to send you the lonely widower next door who only eats soup out of a can because it's the only thing he knows how to cook, or that young, unwed mother with the two kids who is at her wit's end struggling to maintain her sanity, or that person you work with who just seems to always make the wrong choices. And it may not be food that they need. It may be a ride, or a couple hours of babysitting, or friend to confide in. Whatever. If the Lord sends them to you, he'll make sure you have what you need to serve as their host.

But far more importantly, you have God's Word. You have God's Son, Jesus, as your Savior. In him you have forgiveness of sin and eternal life. You have the bread of life from heaven: that's what they really need. And *that* you can serve them. Give them something to eat. It won't cost you a thing – just a bit of your time. And I almost can hear the protest, "Yeah, but I wouldn't know what to say." Hey, it isn't rocket science. It's the Gospel. You don't have to serve an elaborate seven course theological feast for the mind and heart. In a crunch the equivalent of a spiritual pizza will do. Take a Bible passage or story that you know, preferably one that's in some way related to the issue at hand. That's your loaf of bread. Good. Now put it in the hands of Jesus and ask him to bless it. That is, pray about it and ask, "What does this passage or story reveal about God's work to save people through Jesus his Son?" Do this and you will be amazed at the vast quantity of spiritual nourishment that is readily available at the tip of your fingers. All it takes is compassion and the willingness to serve as host.

Which, we will all have to admit, we haven't had enough of in the past. Too often we've seen the needs of others as *their* problem. We don't want to deal with them and we try not to think about it – which only reveals how cold and unloving our hearts really are. So, for the times we've failed, let us implore God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. And being filled again with the benefits of his of compassion, let's resolve to mentally extend the boundaries of our dining rooms to embrace a wider group of people. Let's think of them as guests in our homes. Let's give them something to eat. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!