

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Trinity

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

“How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?” This was the disciples’ anxious question to our Lord when he pointed out that the crowd listening to his teaching needed food. As we see so often in the Gospels, the apostles responded to their situation just as we likely would, with worry. Jesus, however, used this as an opportunity to show his power. This morning, we’ll look at three things: the problem the disciples faced, our Lord’s solution, and the meaning of this miracle for us.

First, the problem. Our Gospel reading situates the Lord and the apostles in an unfamiliar place: not the Jewish towns of Galilee, but the Gentile region of the Decapolis or “ten cities” on the eastern side of the Sea of Tiberias. Here among the Gentiles, our Lord had healed a deaf and mute man and gathered a crowd of eager listeners. This multitude had gone three days without their usual comforts simply for the privilege of hearing his teaching. Looking on them, Jesus observed their hunger and said, “I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with me three days, and have nothing to eat.” The crowd was too far from their homes to comfortably make it back without food, and to the apostles, the situation appeared hopeless.

There are multiple levels of irony, however, in the disciples’ anxiety. First, they had recently observed Jesus feed an even larger crowd of listeners with only a few loaves of bread and several fish. Second, satisfying a multitude with bread in the wilderness was one of the great Old Testament miracles: the feeding of the Israelites with manna during the forty years after the Exodus. Finally, a correct understanding of material provision understands God to be the source of all food, whether in the wilderness or not. As our Collect says, he is the “Lord of all power and might” and “the author and giver of all good things.” Viewed through the eyes of faith, this was an opportunity for God to work, not a reason to succumb to worry.

In the heat of the moment, though, the Apostles forgot all of this. Like Saint Peter taking his eyes off the Lord and beginning to sink beneath the waves, they were overwhelmed by the apparently unsolvable nature of the problem. Amazingly, just a few verses after the end of our Gospel reading, when Jesus had already fed the crowd, the Apostles still began to murmur about how little bread they had, and our Lord had to again challenge their lack of faith. We are no different. Like the disciples, we can often lose sight of God when confronted by a need. We can quickly make long lists of everything we think we need. We can recite, at a moment’s notice, the many headwinds we face in our lives. What we struggle to do is to remember God’s presence with us and provision for us.

Our felt need almost always exceeds our means; and that is precisely why generosity runs so contrary to our instincts. The problem, then, was twofold. Yes, the crowd had an actual need for food. More deeply, though, the Apostles needed their hearts enlightened to the goodness and faithfulness of God.

With that, we come to our Lord's solution. Jesus did not respond to the need of the people with worry. He began, simply, with what had already been given: "How many loaves do you have?" The apostles brought forward a meager portion of seven loaves of bread and a few small fish: a meal for a family, not a multitude. But crucially, they offered this up to Jesus. Our Lord commanded the crowd to sit down, to prepare to receive from Him their daily bread. Then, he "took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to his disciples to set before them."

After the disciples had given all four thousand listeners enough food to eat their fill, they found there was enough left over to fill seven baskets. There is a beautiful significance to this number. When Jesus had miraculously fed a larger crowd near Bethsaida, there were twelve baskets left over: one for each of the Israelite tribes. Similarly, the seven baskets left after this meal recall the seven Canaanite nations named in Deuteronomy. Across both of these miracles, our Lord demonstrated that he was the Provider for both the Jews and the Gentiles.

We should point out that by multiplying this meal, our Lord did what he always does, only on a different timescale and by a different means than his ordinary working. God continually brings forth bread from the earth and fish from the sea. This sudden multiplication then was not a violation of nature but an undeniable example of life-sustaining providence. Notice, too, that the Apostles were willing and integral participants in this miracle. While Jesus could have performed a miracle without the disciples' food, he chose to rely on their generosity. We see in God's works throughout history this delight in using human means to achieve divine ends. This is not weakness on God's part, but rather grace: by accepting the offering of bread and fish, Jesus made his disciples fellow workers with him.

So, what does the feeding of the four thousand mean for us, far away from the Holy Land and confronted with our own, likely different, problems?

First, take comfort in our Lord's capability and compassion. The "Lord of all power and might" still is able to "nourish us with all goodness." Our need never exceeds his love or his ability to provide. To be clear, this does not mean that we can throw up a quick prayer and immediately receive whatever we want. This is evidenced not least by the millions of faithful believers worldwide who still suffer from hunger, deprivation, and

persecution. We should be confident, however, that God will always be present with us in our needs and will supply what is necessary for his mission to bear fruit.

Second, we must imitate the disciples in their offering. Faith in our Lord's provision does not excuse us from his call to be generous. Where we see a need, we must be attuned to his question, "How many loaves do you have?" Our resources may seem insufficient, but we, like the disciples, should be willing to offer what we can and to give thanks for what we have received rather than complain about what we lack. This is most challenging when we can possibly justify our stinginess by blaming those in need. The Lord did not grumble that the crowd should have planned better and brought their own food. Likewise, we who have received richly from God must always hold his blessings with an open hand.

Finally, we should meditate on our Lord's ultimate response to the apostles' question: "How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?" Each of our lives is a pilgrimage through our own personal wilderness: an Exodus out of the Egypt of sin and death toward a Promised Land not yet attained. As our epistle says, we who were once "slaves of uncleanness" are laboring toward righteousness and eternal life, but for us that journey is not yet complete. In our wilderness, we rely on this truth: while the bread of this world perishes, Jesus is himself the living Bread that will never leave us hungry. Look closely at our Lord's actions at the heart of the miracle: he took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to the disciples. In a few minutes, we will see those same four actions. We will take, bless, break, and give bread at this altar, confident in our Lord's promise that this is his Body, which is given for us. So now we must, like the crowds, "sit down" – that is, we must quiet our anxious hearts, lay aside all earthly cares, and receive the Bread of Life.

Saint Mark ends this miracle story with a final, important detail: "And he sent them away." This sending was not a dismissal, but a commission. The crowd had been nourished, both physically and spiritually, but the miracle of encountering Christ could not end there. He sent them out as his ministers, to take what they had received and share with their communities. We also will be commissioned today – not just sent home but sent to our homes, to continue God's work in and through us. Let us go back to our daily lives and vocations knowing that we, the people of God, have been satisfied with true bread here in the wilderness.

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