

## “Abundant Grace”

Mark 6:30-44

July 22, 2018

9<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

We’ve all been there: a picnic sponsored by our school, our employer, some organization to which we belong, and so on. After you’ve seen all the advertising for “food, fun, fellowship”, you come to the picnic rather hungry. You expect to be well fed. Since it is not a family picnic but a corporate picnic, you have to line up for the food. You wait for a long time and finally, when you get to the front of the line, someone there says, “You may have one hot dog or one hamburger, one bag of chips, one cookie, and one can of pop. There may be seconds, but you’ll have to wait and see.” This has happened to me. Have you been fed? Yes, but not satisfied. You’re hoping there will be seconds, but there are no guarantees. Sometimes, when everybody has gone through the line, there is no food left. (And, at some picnics like this, the food runs out before everybody’s gone through the line the 1<sup>st</sup> time.) And you think, “Sure, it’s a picnic, but not a very enjoyable one. I was expecting to be well fed, but I sure didn’t get enough to eat.” It kind of takes the fun out of the day.

Have you ever felt that life is like such a picnic? You expect life to be fun and full of good things. We expect much money, material goods, love (both family and romantic), success in education, in sports, and our career, and many other things. As we stand in the line of life, waiting to be served all the good stuff we expect, we experience something akin to the “one hot dog/one hamburger” disappointment which we feel at some picnics. We get very little of all that we want and some don’t even get the hot dog.

It is easy to feel disappointed and become discouraged with life. Life seems to be not much of a picnic. So, what do we do? According to our text, Jesus throws a pretty good picnic.

This picnic of sorts takes place at a very important time in Jesus’ ministry. Before our little interlude with John the Baptist last week, Jesus had sent out the Twelve to preach, teach, cast out demons, and heal people. At the beginning of our text for today, they are returning to share the accounts of their ministry. This had been a particularly tiring trip for the apostles. They had run themselves ragged in their ministries. Jesus recognize this and encouraged them to take some time off, to go to a isolated place, and rest a while.

However, in seeking refuge and rest, Jesus and His disciples entered a chaotic situation. They can’t get away from their work. The people who had benefited from their ministry saw them leave and chased after them, arriving in the isolated place even before Jesus and the disciples. They were desperately seeking help. When Jesus and His disciples arrived and got out of the boat, they found themselves in a desolate place – a wilderness of sorts – a place untouched and uncontrolled by man. This would be a good place to rest, but not a good place to minister.

Jesus’ reaction is interesting. He and His disciples could have been angry and upset for being bothered on their “day off.” When He saw the people, he could’ve been angry and rejected them, but he doesn’t. Instead, the text says that Jesus had compassion on the people – that deep and strong love which emanated from deep within His gut. Instead of rejecting the people, Jesus ministered to the people.

At the end of the day, it became apparent that food was needed. It was no time for a picnic full of fun, but it was time to feed a great number of people. Since there were no Super One Foods or McDonald’s, they had to find a different way to feed the people. The disciples, perhaps worn out from the work they had done previously and the work they had done now, without rest and without even the time to eat, just want Jesus to send the people away. Don’t feed them. Let them be responsible for feeding themselves. Get this problem out of our lives. They are just plain nuisances. With this solution, no one gets anything to eat

Jesus won’t go along with this. Instead, in order to test them, Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” Let the responsibility for feeding this great crowd rest with the disciples. They can figure out how to obtain enough food, set up the picnic line, and decide how to feed the people fairly. The tired disciples don’t react well to this suggestion, either. Instead of seeing the people as a nuisance, they now see only the cost of doing this and are discouraged by it. The disciples respond to

Jesus by saying, "Shall we go and buy 200 denarii (approximately six months' worth of wages for the working man) worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" This was way too expensive. Even if they could accumulate that much money, in this scenario, the people would only get very little to eat.

So, Jesus Himself takes the problem upon Himself alone to solve it. First of all, Jesus procures the necessary food to feed the people. If you ever felt that a picnic which you attended did not have enough food, it's nothing compared with this story. Jesus asks the disciples how much food they had. They replied, "Five loaves and two fish." This is both a very little amount and a very humble menu. But Jesus will make it work.

Secondly, Jesus finds a good place and way to distribute the food. Somehow, in the midst of this dead dry desert, Jesus found green grass. Instead of a place untouched and uncontrolled by man, they had a green pasture provided by the Good Shepherd and controlled by Him. It's as if it was a sacred space. Rather than setting up tables like a modern-day picnic for people to walk by and pick up their food, Jesus had them sit in the sacred space to receive their meal from Him.

Thirdly, Jesus fed the people. He looked up into heaven, said a prayer of blessing, and gave the food to the disciples for them to distribute. The people received the food at this impromptu picnic and ate... and ate and ate and ate. This was no "one hot dog" or "one hamburger" limit. The people did not eat until the food ran out (as we sometimes do it such picnics), but they ate until they were satisfied.

Fourthly, there were leftovers. The disciples gathered up twelve baskets full of broken pieces of bread and fish. Despite the fact that they began this picnic with far less food than was needed and with a far greater crowd than was expected (number of men fed were 5,000, but if the wives and children were counted, the crowd could swell up to 10 or 15,000), not only did all the people have all they wanted and all they needed, there was food left over for a future meal. When Jesus provides, there is enough and more.

This text is not only a microcosm of a successful picnic, but it is a microcosm of our lives here on earth. Like the crowd which follow Jesus, our lives are in chaos. Every day, we experience problems of all kinds: financial, interpersonal, health, and so on. Like the people in our text, we are in desperate need and seeking help.

We tend to think that these experiences are the problems. But they are not. They are only symptoms of the chief problem in our world, sin. Sin has separated us from God and from each other, deprived us of that we need up to and including life here on earth, and left us dazed and confused. As the day came to a close in our text, the disciples realized that the people needed feeding. In the same way, as this world draws to a close, we may perceive the need for getting rid of our sin and getting right with God. What's the solution?

Jesus comes to us. As in the story, Jesus could've come in anger at our sin – for all the many times we have done the bad which God has forbidden, thought the bad which God has forbidden, and spoke the bad which God has forbidden. He could've come with punishment for sin – for the many times we failed to do all good which God has commanded, failed to think only the good which God has commanded, and failed to speak all of the good which God has commanded.

However, Jesus does not come in anger or with punishment. Instead He sees us in our miserable condition – guilty of sin and suffering the consequences of sin and has deep and strong compassion – the compassion from His own gut for us and sees us as sheep without a shepherd. He comes, not to destroy us, but to save us.

Our efforts at solving our own problems and saving ourselves have is about as much for success as the people in our text had of feeding themselves. We end up failing to cure the problem of sin, as well as the consequences of sin, because we do not have the resources to do it. We may become cynical regarding the possibility of ever being rescued from our position.

But Jesus takes on the problem for us. He becomes our Good Shepherd who comes to care for the flock and to rescue the flock. He lays down His life for the sheep in order to gain forgiveness for sin. He takes up His life for the sheep after three days that he might distribute His gifts to the flock.

The flock is not a nuisance to our Lord, nor is the price too high, nor are the gifts too small or unsatisfying. They are exactly what we need for true satisfaction.

So, in the midst of the wilderness of this world where no man has control, Jesus finds the green grass of safety and separation, namely, the church. It is here where Jesus will feed His people.

What kind of feeding will it be? When we hear a sermon like we did two weeks ago about the sufficiency of grace, it may call to mind the “one hot dog/one hamburger” situations of picnics today. We may think it implies a very minimalistic life. We may think it is the will of God to have just enough material goods to eke out a living on this world and to have just enough of God’s compassion and grace to serve as a divine death insurance policy – forgiveness and a home in heaven when we die. Just as people may start to avoid picnics where little is served and dissatisfaction is prevalent, many may be avoiding the Church of God for a similar reason. People may think that God has so little to offer and that what He has to offer will not and cannot satisfy.

But our God is a most generous God. Jesus has so much more to offer than we ever imagined. Like in our text, He uses items which are very little and seem very humble. In our situation, His “bread and fish” are the Word of God, water, bread & wine. Through these seemingly small and unimportant items, Jesus is able to multiply God’s love, mercy, forgiveness to us. He feeds us abundantly with his gifts. There is always enough, even when there are great number of sinners or a great number of sins.

This is more than the fulfillment of a religious ritual. This is more than a taste of life. This is life as God intends for us to have. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) This does not refer to an abundance of things of this world – things which eventually will be consumed, lost, stolen, broken, or destroyed. Jesus has more for us than that.

However, having said that, it is true that God, for the sake of Jesus, has taken very good care of us physically. Despite shortages and sufferings, material blessings are very abundant in our lives. In our situation, we have been fed with, not only what we need to support this body and life, but with so much more. We have more than what we need and we often have more of the luxuries which we do not need but make life enjoyable. These are all good gifts from the Creator of all that exists.

By the Word of God and through His Holy Sacraments, we have life and blessing beyond just the physical and material world. We have been fed with spiritual blessings which are more than a religion of rules to follow or some “pie in the sky” religion to believe in which does us good only when we die. We have been washed clean in the waters of Holy Baptism and given new life. We are peace with God, free to be forgiven and loved. We are at peace with each other, free to forgive one another and love one another as God, in Christ, has loved us. We are strengthened and supported in that new life through the words of Holy Scripture which show us God’s will, bring forgiveness for our violations of that will, and guides us in that will of God. But still, that is not all.

In our text, one of the overlooked details is that there were twelve baskets of leftovers. Nothing is said about what was done with these leftovers, but it is assumed they were consumed at a later meal. Now, some people don’t like leftovers, but I believe that leftovers, not only provide us what we need for the future, but often, as in the case with spaghetti, for example, taste even better the second time you eat of it. All of our material blessings and all of our spiritual blessings do not exhaust God’s grace toward us. Perhaps, it’s not proper to say there are “leftovers” because that implies poor planning on God’s part. Maybe it’s better to say there is still more to come.

In our lives now, we have a meal prepared for us by which we are fed, encouraged, and strengthened. It is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in and with bread and wine, given for the forgiveness of our sin and the strengthening of our faith. Yet, despite the great magnitude of what this meal is and what it provides for us, there is still more left to come. For what we experience here at our Lord’s altar, is but a foretaste of the feast to come – “the marriage supper of the Lamb”. There we will feast and be fed forever without any shortages, deficits, or need for all eternity.

We may have had bad experiences with picnics here on earth at which we did not receive enough or received nothing to satisfy our hunger. We may have even had good experiences with picnics which gave us enough to eat. However, there is nothing that beats the picnic that Jesus has

set up for us. He not only hosts the feast but He IS the feast. He not only gives us sufficient Grace, but provides us with abundant Grace. He gives us, not just what we need, but an abundance of the things we desire as well. We are not only satisfied at His picnic in Divine Service here and now, but there is more than enough for a grand and glorious future meal that will never end. What more could we ask for? What more could we desire? What more could we need? In Jesus, we have it all. Amen