

"Fully Fed"
Matthew 14:13-21

July 31, 2011

7th Sunday After Pentecost

Many people today think that Christians “spiritualize” Christianity far too much. We tend to think (or, at least, give the impression) that God is only about spiritual things. The material world, if not sinful in itself, is, at best, a necessary evil. Christians, at times, can be in a quandary about how they should deal with material goods. Can they turn their attention away from spiritual matters and legitimately enjoy material goods? Or, must they shun the things of this world to dwell only upon the things of the world to come?

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus “sends an important message, to wit, the reign of God in the world is not just concerned with spiritual needs....We should be wary of too quickly making a hard and fast distinction between spiritual and physical needs.” (Gibbs, p.749-750). The text says that when Jesus saw the crowd, He had compassion for them in their needs – their physical needs. In addition to healing the sick, Jesus takes care of a necessary, though mundane, matter. He feeds hungry people.

After a day of teaching, Jesus and His disciples find themselves in a very desolate place without food. When supper time comes, the disciples try to get Jesus to send the crowds away from Him to get their needs met. They think the only reasonable thing to do is send the crowds away so they can get to the markets in the surrounding villages and provide food for themselves before it gets dark. “Apparently, the disciples think that Jesus either cannot or does not want to do anything about the crowds’ need for food.” (Gibbs, p.750).

Initially, Jesus tells the disciples to feed the people. The disciples immediately admit their inadequacies for the task. “We have only five loaves here and two fish,” they said. They couldn’t feed the people.

So, Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.” Then, in quite a miraculous way, Jesus uses these humble means – five loaves and two fish – to feed the people. This is a miracle in several ways. He

fed 5,000 men – in addition to women and children. Some have estimated the total number in the crowd to be around 20,000. They not only eat, but are filled up and satisfied. They are not only satisfied, but there are twelve large baskets of food left over. Jesus provided for such a meager need as food in a miraculous and magnificent way.

Jesus does the same for us. We are in a desolate place – earth – where, apart from God, we have nothing and can provide nothing for ourselves. Of course, we don't think that. A child was once asked, "Where does food come from?" The child replied, "Why, the grocery store, of course!" But that's not where food comes from. It's where food ends up.

Jesus provides for all our food needs in a miraculous way, if you stop to think about it. The grains and plants from which we get food miraculously grow and bear fruit by God's design and through His power. He provides the soil, the rain, and the nutrients. He causes the plants to germinate, grow, bud, and bear fruit and vegetables. The same is true for the animals which provide us dairy products, meat, and other food. God brings about the miracle of birth and growth for these animals.

How the food gets to us is through humble means in extraordinary ways. The farmer grows the food. Others people process the food. Still other people transport the food. And still other people display and sell the food. And finally others (mothers or spouses) bring the food home, prepare the food, and put it before you on your dining room table.

Therefore, all food we receive is a gift of our Lord as a result of His mercy. When we sit down to eat, we pray in the so-called "common table prayer", "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest; let YOUR gifts to us be blessed." The food set before us is from Jesus. It is given freely to us. And it is blessed just as the food in our text was blessed by Jesus.

To say that Jesus cares for our physical needs is not to say that's ALL He cares about. He has compassion for us both in body AND soul. His action in our text is a visual sermon. He not only helps people in their physical needs. He points to a great help for a greater need in our very souls.

Spiritually speaking, our world is quite a desolate place for people. It is filled with troubles and evil of all kinds. We are starving for purpose and meaning in life. We thirst for something to satisfy us now and give us hope for the future.

As the day of this life is coming to an end, many people do what Jesus' disciples did in order care for this need: send us away from Jesus to find satisfaction on our own. Hungering and thirsting, we try to find it. We look for it in pleasure and possessions; school and work; sports and entertainment; and so on. But it doesn't seem to work. It's like being on a lifeboat at sea and drinking sea water. It doesn't quench your thirst, but only makes you thirstier for more. Eventually it will kill you. In the same way, the "food" of this world does not give lasting satisfaction but only temporary excitement which only makes us want more. The end of all these things is death.

In our Old Testament lesson, the Lord asks, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" That is a good question. Yet we do it. We use our resources to obtain false food for our soul. We work hard for that which does not satisfy.

Jesus has compassion on us. He comes to feed us – to feed our very souls. His resources are meager and not very striking, just like the five little loaves and the two small fish. Jesus has His own weak and humble human body and a wooden cross. He lifts His eyes to heaven as He is lifted up on the cross. He offers His body as a sacrifice for the root cause of our spiritual starvation – sin. When He is brought down from that cross, He has earned the food that will feed us in our souls and give us lasting satisfaction: forgiveness for sin.

Like in the text where Jesus gave the miraculously obtained food to His apostles to give to the people, so Jesus gives this miraculously obtained food to His pastors to give to the people. His pastors give His Holy Word to His people. His Word not only proclaims forgiveness or describes forgiveness or promises forgiveness, but His Word GIVES forgiveness – in the absolution, the readings, and the preaching. As Isaiah says, "Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live."

Jesus nourishes our soul with a literal feeding in His Supper. As Moses fed the people of Israel with miraculous bread called manna in the desert; as Jesus fed the people of Israel with miraculous bread and fish in the desert; so pastors feed us with miraculous bread which is Jesus' body and miraculous wine which is Jesus' blood. This feast does not merely remember Jesus' sacrifice or symbolize Jesus' sacrifice. This feast imparts to us the fruits of that sacrifice: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. At this meal, we are in communion with God Himself.

But that's not the end of Jesus' miraculous feeding. There is a feast yet to come. Despite our peace with God and His presence with us here on earth; despite our opportunity to serve him and be in fellowship with His Church here, we hunger for more. St. Paul expressed those feelings to the Philippians as he waited to die in his prison cell

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” (Philippians 1:21-23)

Have you similarly been torn between enjoying God's blessings now and hungering to be in the direct presence of Christ in heaven? This hunger to live forever is something Christ feeds as well. By virtue of His resurrection from the dead to eternal life, we are assured of our own resurrection and eternal life with Him. As Jesus promised Martha at the death of her brother, Lazarus, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25)

Eternal life with the Lord is not sitting around on the clouds, strumming harps, or an eternal church service. The Bible describes it as a feast – a rousing, roaring, unrestrained, uninhibited celebration of eating and drinking forever. Isaiah prophesied in these words often heard at funeral services:

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine— the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will

swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth." (Isaiah 25:6-8)

The book of Revelation describes how this joyfully will be fulfilled: "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" (Rev. 19:9)

We get a taste of this feast every time we celebrate Holy Communion. Here, on our altar, heaven and earth touch as we join together "with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven" to celebrate this ultimate feast and feeding. In the collect following this communion, we acknowledge that "You have given us a foretaste of the feast to come in the Holy Supper" and we pray that "we may together with all your saints, celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end."

Sometimes an appetizer can be a whole meal. But a meal can also be an appetizer. The food and drink we share now, both physically at our tables and spiritually at the Lord's Table, are satisfying and complete. But they are only appetizers. We receive them with thanksgiving and enjoy them as God intended for us to do as we await the ultimate and eternal feast in heaven where we will be finally and fully fed. Amen.