

## **“A Feast for All”**

“When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”

The Town Club had long been known as the best restaurant in town. Its food and service were legendary, and anyone who had the opportunity to dine there would consider it one of the best meals they had ever eaten. But getting the opportunity to eat at the Town Club was not that easy; for one thing, there was no sign on the building to indicate its presence, nor did the Club advertise in any local media. The other aspect of the Town Club that prevented many people from eating there was that it was a private dining club with a very limited and exclusive membership; only members and their guests were admitted to the dining room, and the waiting list for membership stretched on for many years. For many people, dining at the Town Club was something that was not going to be possible for them.

There are many reasons why people may be restricted from dining in certain locations. It might be a private affair such as a wedding reception, an anniversary dinner, or a retirement party. It may be that the guest list needs to be limited for financial or space reasons, or that the meal is meant for certain people in a particular circumstance. But on many occasions, restricting access to a dining table is a matter of status and prestige; only those deemed “acceptable” are allowed a place at the table, while others on the “outside” are kept away from sharing the meal.

Today’s Gospel lesson is one of the most familiar of Jesus’ miracle stories, the Feeding of the Five Thousand. It is such an important event in Jesus’ life and ministry that it is the only miracle reported in all four Gospels (it may also be found in Mark 6:32-44, Luke 9:10b-17, and John 6:1-15). It is a story of a miraculous feeding of a multitude from a very meager cache of food...five loaves of bread and two fish. It is a meal in which Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that invites all people to eat and drink of the feast that God prepares for all people:

- “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your

labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” – Isaiah 55:1-2.

Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the multitude that has come out to be in his presence is reminiscent of several food miracles found in the Old Testament. In Exodus 16, God provided manna from heaven to feed the Israelites in the wilderness (“*Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.’*” – Exodus 16:4). In the First Book of Kings, Elijah provided for the widow of Zarephath so that her jar of meal and cruet of oil supplied the household throughout an extended famine (“*For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: the jar of meal will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth ... The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.*” – 1 Kings 17:14-16). In a miracle that is like Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the multitude on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Elisha multiplied twenty loaves for one hundred men with food to spare (“*So he repeated, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’*” He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.” – 2 Kings 4:43-44). In his feeding to the multitude, Jesus once again shows that his ministry is a continuation of God’s loving actions in providing for the needs of God’s people.

While Matthew’s version of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is like the accounts of the other Evangelists, it begins with his reporting that “*when Jesus had heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself*” (Matthew 14:13). Matthew is referring to the horrific episode that preceded the miracle: the martyrdom of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas. John had been arrested because he dared to challenge Herod on account of the king’s relationship with his brother’s wife Herodias:

- “For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because John had been telling him, ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’” – 14:3-4.

When Herod’s birthday arrives, the king organizes a lavish feast with a very exclusive guest list; even though the Herodian dynasty had no legitimate claim to the throne of Israel, people would clamor for an invitation to a royal feast because of the perceived prestige that such an invitation carried with it. It was at this exclusive dinner that excluded most of the people of Israel that Herod was so taken by the dancing of the daughter of Herodias (identified elsewhere as Salome) that “*he promised an oath to grant her whatever she might ask*” (14:7). Prompted by her

mother, she replied, “*Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.*” (14:8). The king was at first reluctant to grant such a request, but “*out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison*” (14:9-10). Herod’s exclusive dinner party had turned into an occasion of unspeakable slaughter solely so that Herod could save face among his guests; the lavish meal was forever tainted by the blood of an innocent man.

Matthew reports that John’s disciples “*came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus*” (14:13). Jesus’ response is one that is understandable for anyone who has ever received news of such a horrific death of a loved one: “*he withdrew from there to a deserted place by himself.*” While each of us may react differently when we receive such sorrowful news, we can understand why Jesus needed to be alone when he heard what had happened to someone who was such an important part of his life and ministry:

- “Jesus’ cousin, herald, compatriot, minister, and friend John the Baptist, the one with whom he once danced together in their respective mothers’ wombs, has had his unjust incarceration culminate in the death penalty. For greed and pleasure, John’s head has literally been served on a platter, his severed body picked up by friends and buried, and Jesus receives the news and wants to be alone.” – Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones, *The Christian Century*.

Jesus withdraws by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where Herod has no authority. He is now on the eastern shore of the Sea, which was Gentile territory; but despite this remote location, Jesus’ time of solitude does not last long, for “*when he went ashore, he saw a great crowd*” (14:14). This may have been an unwelcome sight for the grieving Jesus; at the time of his profound sadness and mourning, a time when more than ever he needed to be alone, he is once again confronted by crowds who have followed him across the waters. We would understand if Jesus asked them for a few moments of solitude; but Matthew reports that when Jesus sees the crowds, he is neither frustrated nor annoyed at their presence. Instead, his reaction when he saw that crowd was that “*he had compassion for them and cured their sick.*”

- “As he peered out across the vast human sea of hunger and heartache that pressed in around him, however fatigued [he may have been], Jesus made himself available to the sick and suffering.” – Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri.

Jesus’ compassionate response to the crowds is yet another example of how he is truly *Emmanuel*, “God with us,” and that his preaching, teaching, and miracles are all signs of the character of God whose presence Jesus bears. It was also a sign that

Jesus embodies the steadfast love of God that sets the Lord God of Israel apart from other gods of the ancient world, who were now known for caring about people like the crowds along the shore:

- “The gods of the ancient philosophers, for instance, were considered dispassionate and so were regularly referred to by cozy names like ‘the Unmoved Mover’ or ‘First Cause.’ On the other end of the spectrum, the gods of the Greek and Roman empires were notorious for using humans as playthings and for ordering the world to their whims. At best, gods were supposed to take the side of the rich and powerful, to stand with people like Herod and his well-fed party guests, sanctioning their exploitation of the poor and even the bloody murder of a truth-teller like John. They were definitely *not* known for siding with the oppressed, the ordinary, the downtrodden, or the hungry.” – David Lose.

Jesus’ compassion for the crowds moves him, even as he is deeply grieving the slaughter of John, to care for them as the embodiment of God’s steadfast love and compassion for God’s people. This loving compassion continues when evening arrives and the disciples approach Jesus with word that “*this is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.*” (14:15). The disciples are concerned for the crowds, who are not pictured as hungry and destitute, unable to buy food, but as being so enthralled by Jesus’ healing activity that they are reluctant to leave. While this may have seemed like a reasonable suggestion to the disciples, it was probably unrealistic, since Matthew has already reported that this is a “deserted place” and the “villages” may have been too far away for such a multitude to buy food for themselves, even if they had the money.

Instead of agreeing with the suggestion of his disciples, Jesus responds with a two-part answer. He first tells the disciples that “*they need not go away*” (14:16a); he does not want the people who have come so far to have to leave his loving, compassionate presence. He then instructs the disciples to provide for the multitudes: “*you give them something to eat*” (14:16b). Such a response must have shocked the disciples, who report that “*we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish*” (14:17). But Jesus will soon show that his followers will be participants in his ministry of sharing God’s abundance with God’s people, no matter how reluctant or unqualified they may appear:

- “Jesus uses his disciples, even when they would rather look after themselves, to tend the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children ...

Whatever their initial skepticism, or doubt, or self-preoccupation, the disciples are caught up in Jesus' words of abundance and gratitude and distribute what they have and participate in the wonder and joy." – Lose.

When the disciples report that all they have to feed the multitude are five loaves and two fish, Jesus responds by commanding both the disciples and the crowds. He instructs the disciples to "*bring them here to me,*" and then Jesus "*ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass*" (14:18-19). Like the host of a Jewish feast, Jesus pronounced the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to pass out to the people: "*taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*" Matthew does not report exactly how the loaves and fishes were multiplied; all we are told is that "*all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.*" (14:20). The scope of the miracle is emphasized when Matthew concludes by reporting that "*those who were fed were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*" (14:21). The title of the miracle – "the Feeding of the Five Thousand" – is somewhat misleading, since the actual number of the multitude may have been in the tens of thousands. No matter how many people shared this meal on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, it was a meal in which "*all ate and were filled*"; unlike Herod's feast that featured an exclusive guest list that kept many away from the table, at the table of the Lord all were welcome and all were fed – not merely a crumb, but a feast that resulted in all being filled with bread to spare. It was a sign of God's steadfast love for God's people, how God provides for all of needs of God's people "*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!*" (*Small Catechism*), a reminder to people of all generations that God cares "*for the poor and hungry that God loves so much [and that] God still cares deeply and passionately for those who are most vulnerable – the poor, the immigrant, the hungry – and God continues to use us to care for them.*" (Lose).

Unlike meals that are defined by who is *not* invited, the meal that our Lord sets before us is a meal that is meant for all, because the God who created the heavens and the earth is the God who still provides for all people and continues to shower blessings upon us so that when we pray "*give us this day our daily bread*" we pray in confidence that God provides "*everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies*" and that "*we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving*" (*Small Catechism*). The meal that our Lord provides for us is a feast that is meant for all, and as Jesus uses his disciples to distribute this miraculous meal our Lord continues to use his followers in every generation as the instruments through which his loving

will is accomplished. As we give thanks in the recognition that “*all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,*” we also strive to be faithful to our Lord’s call to share his abundance with others, so that all may be fed and know that it is God’s Will that all may know that there is a place for them at the table of the Lord.

- “The source of the feeding is God, but the resources are human. The work of the disciples, the ‘bread’ of human effort, is honoured, used, and magnified by Jesus.” – M. Eugene Boring.

Our status as the children of God is not gained by striving for access to tables at which others are excluded, but by acknowledging that we have a place at the table of the Lord not by our own strength or efforts but by God’s gracious, loving act in claiming us as God’s children through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God, we also pledge ourselves to living according to the command of Jesus that “*you give them something to eat,*” that the abundance we possess is not something for us to hoard or to use for our own selfish gains or status but is meant to be shared with all so that all may know that they are God’s beloved children and heirs of the abundance that God desires for all to share.

- “All Christian action – whether it is visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or working for a more just and peaceful society – is a manifestation of the human solidarity revealed to us in the house of God. It is not an anxious human effort to create a better world. It is a confident expression of the truth that in Christ, death, evil, and destruction have been overcome. It is not a fearful attempt to restore a broken order. It is a joyful assertion that in Christ all order has already been restored.” – Henri Nouwen.

While the Town Club thrived for many years on its reputation for exclusivity, this would prove to be its downfall when people in the community no longer felt the need to dine in a restaurant that was founded on who was not invited to have a seat at its tables. When it closed, few people mourned its passing, since no one felt the need to keep people away from sharing a meal. Our call as God’s people is to recognize and give thanks for all of the blessings that are ours because of God’s gracious, steadfast love for us, and to commit ourselves to be faithful stewards of the blessings entrusted to us so that, like the first disciples, we may be faithful to Jesus call to “*give them something to eat*” so that all people may know that God’s blessings are a feast for all and that there is always a place for us at the table of the Lord.

Amen.