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Pentecost 11

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
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“Join the Crowds . . . Come and Eat!”

Text: Matthew 14:13-21

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Usually when we hear the Holy Gospel that we heard today, we focus on the miracle of Jesus feeding so many people with so little food. And, that is important! But before we get to that point, there is a great deal to be found in these verses that deserves our attention, and can help us appreciate this miracle even more deeply than I think we usually do. And so today I would like to go through this account verse by verse, and draw you into it, and put you there, so that you too, like the crowds, will be well fed and satisfied.

And so we began, ***“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.”***

Now in the first place, what exactly was it that Jesus had heard, that caused Him to withdraw by boat to a desolate place by Himself? He heard the news that His cousin, John the Baptist, was no more. He had been beheaded by Herod the Tetrarch, and John’s disciples came to report this news to Jesus. And Jesus’ response to this news is to go off by Himself to be alone. Perhaps He wanted to pray, as He often did. Perhaps He went off to escape the threat to His own life – not because He was scared, but because it was not yet time for Him to die. His hour had not yet come. Perhaps it was for both of these reasons. But He wanted to be alone for a time.

But He is not alone for very long, for when the crowds of people heard ***“it,”*** they went looking for Jesus! And they found Him, by following His boat on foot along the shore. . . . Now, just as we began by thinking about what Jesus had heard, what was it that the crowds had heard? It is not exactly clear what the ***“it”*** was. It is possible that they went looking for Jesus simply because they had heard that He left. But I think more likely is the contrast that is being set up here by Matthew – that when Jesus heard about John, He left to be alone; but when the *crowds* heard about John, they went to find Jesus. They wanted to be with Jesus. They went to the only place, or the only person, they knew to go to. . . . And isn’t that how it often is with us sinners. When things are going well, when life is good, many tend to push God to the back burner. Oh, He’s there, He’s in my life, but other things take priority right now. And while He may get pushed farther back for some than for others, even for the

faithful it sometimes takes a tragedy, or something to shake us up, or some bad news, for us to realize our need. To realize *“our help is in the Name of the Lord.”* For us to put the less important things on the back burner, and chase after God as if our life depended on it. As these crowds did. They heard, and went where they knew they needed to go.

Then, ***“When he [Jesus] went ashore he saw [the] great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.”***

Usually, when we want to be alone, we want to be alone! And intrusions are not welcome. But there is a different sense here, for even though Jesus wants to be alone, He cannot help Himself. And you can almost picture the scene: Jesus with a heavy heart, mourning the loss of His cousin and pondering the future, goes off. He’s probably praying, and His mind is thinking of all kinds of things. Perhaps He’s not even really paying that much attention to what’s happening around Him. You know how that is, when you get “lost in your thoughts,” when you are so deep in thought about something. And so perhaps He didn’t even notice the crowds following Him by foot along the shore . . . until He got there! And as He goes ashore, He sees them. Men, women, and children. Young and old. Married and single. Rich and poor. People from all walks of life. And as much as He may want to be alone, He cannot help Himself! It is for these that He is here, not for Himself. And He is filled with compassion. His heart goes out to them and He begins to heal them. These are His sheep, who have come running after their shepherd.

***“Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ”***

It actually was twilight – that time when it is still light out, but the sun is going down. And so the disciples come to Him and *actually* say not that ***“the day is now over,”*** but it says in the original Greek that the disciples’ report that ***“the hour has already passed.”*** The hour – that is a signal to us! A theological signal; for that is a word with much theological weight. Because while the disciples were certainly well-intentioned here, and meant that the hour for eating had passed, in reality the hour had not passed for Jesus, but had actually now come! For now was the hour of salvation. Now was the hour of Jesus’ power and authority. And we are reminded of the words of Jesus, ***“I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work.”*** And so while it was literally not yet night, it was also *figuratively* not yet night! And Jesus was going to do what He came to do – take care of His sheep.

And so while the disciples tell Jesus to ***“send the crowds away”*** so that they can ***“go into the villages and buy food for themselves,”*** Jesus has something else in mind. Before only *some* of the people were needy, and He healed them. But now they are all needy. . . . And

here we can see ourselves. For we are needy. Needy of body, and needy of soul. We are in the desolation of this world of sin, and are in need of all that our Saviour has to give. If He didn't give it, we wouldn't have it. We are beggars. Impoverished of soul, burdened with sin, struggling and in need of healing, hungry for the only food that satisfies and thirsty for living water. And Jesus does not disappoint. He does not send us away to fend for ourselves. He knows our need and has come to provide. His hour has come.

And so, ***“Jesus [says to His disciples], “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ”***

We should not be surprised that only five loaves of bread and two fish were more than enough to feed so many people. God had fed His people in the desolate wilderness before, and not just for one day, but for 40 years. As the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness, they were given bread to eat, manna, in abundance. Always more than they needed. . . . And so here is more than enough. The prophet greater than Moses is here. John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet, is now gone, and it is now the “hour” for Jesus to surpass both John and Moses in the eyes of the crowds. And while the disciples do not yet realize this, and think the challenge too great, they will soon realize.

And isn't it interesting – its not the crowds that are worried about food for themselves, it is the disciples. And so Jesus challenges them! The people need food? Fine – ***“You give them something to eat.”*** How shocking those words must have sounded to the disciples! Because they are not yet ready to assume this responsibility. Their training is not yet complete. They have so little! But they will soon be the feeders. They will be the ones sent out by Jesus to feed the world with His Word and Sacraments. And while those means, the Word and Sacraments of God, may seem so small and little, they are enough. They will miraculously feed the world and never run out. For indeed they are here for us, feeding us, and given to us by those who go out in Jesus' stead now, His pastors. . . . But the disciples are not yet ready. Today will be an important part of their training!

***“Then [Jesus] ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.”***

Now, if today was to be an important part of the disciples' training, did they understand the lesson that Jesus was here teaching them? This lesson of feeding? It seems so . . . for the word that Matthew uses here for the crowds to ***“sit down”*** really isn't the word for “sit” at all. It is the word “to recline.” It is the word used for how people at that time would “recline” at table to eat a banquet. It was the word used for the posture of the disciples as they reclined around the table of the Lord in the Upper Room on the night when Jesus was betrayed. And don't we hear echoes of that night here already in this desolate place? Jesus

took the bread . . . looked up to Heaven . . . blessed . . . broke . . . and gave to the disciples. What Jesus did that day in the desert was not the Lord's Supper, but the disciples had heard and learned their lesson! Not right away, but they realized after Jesus ascended and they received the Holy Spirit. They realized that what they saw here in the desert is what they would now be doing. Feeding God's people with the Bread from Heaven. Feeding God's people with the Bread of Life. For while Jesus was soon going to ascend the cross and give His life for the life of the world, and give His flesh and blood for our food and drink, the crowds would keep coming. And it would be the disciples feeding them.

***“. . . and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.”***

They were satisfied. And look at what has happened – reversal! The desolate place has become a place of plenty, while the places they came from, the cities and towns were actually the places of want and need. . . . And don't we see that today? Today more than ever! People living in cities of millions, but being more lonely and isolated than ever. People with great wealth, but being more unhappy with their lives than ever. People being able to communicate by telephone, fax, e-mail, pager, satellite, and more, but feeling as if no one is listening; that no one really knows them. . . . Look at the crowds today. Not much has really changed.

And look at yourself! Look at the need not only in others, but also in you. Why is it that the more we are forgiven the more we sin? Why is it that we do not hunger and thirst for God's Word as we know we should? Why do we not look around and have the compassion for others that Jesus did? Why do we look for fulfillment and meaning where it cannot be found? Why with the abundance of riches that we have in the Church do we seem more impoverished than ever? . . . The desert is not only where others are . . . we are the needy. We are the beggars. We are the ones burdened with sin from which we cannot set ourselves free.

But it is not yet the night! It is the hour of compassion, and Jesus is here – with all that He is and all that He has, to give to us all that we need. To give to us His Absolution, to unburden us from our load of sin. To give to us His living water, so that we never thirst again. To give to us His food, His body and blood, so that we will be satisfied. For that is what Jesus came to do, and why He hung on the tree of the cross. To turn that tree of curse and shame into a life-giving tree, a tree of life, growing in the wilderness, for the life of the world. And because He has risen from the dead, He is here for us just as He was there in the desert. Having compassion, feeding, and giving. And this is the food of which Isaiah wrote, which costs us nothing, for the price has already been paid – in the blood of the Lamb on the cross.

And so come! Come to the Table of your Lord, and receive His life-giving bread. Come and be satisfied, and depart – not searching, not chasing after that which cannot satisfy – but depart in peace. In the peace of sins forgiven. In the peace of communion with God. In the peace which surpasses all understanding, but keeps you strong through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Come and eat, and find rest for your souls.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.