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Pentecost 9

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“In This Desolate Place, Too”
Text: Mark 6:30-44; Jeremiah 23:1–6

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

Who was in the crowd that day? Those 5,000 men - plus perhaps women and children - who ran there on foot to get to Jesus? Who were they? Well, they are undoubtedly just like the group that has come here today.

People struggling with issues in their lives.

People with family difficulties. Husbands and wives who fought last night and are still not speaking. Moms and Dads dealing with rebellious children. And children struggling to take care of aging parents.

They are people struggling with temptation and sin, beset with sins they can't seem to shake and filled with guilt. Knowing what they *should* do, but failing time after time.

They are people for whom life is empty and uncertain. Lonely people, yearning for a friend.

They are people filled with worries. People filled with sadness, regrets about the past and what could have been, about the future and what will be; people struggling with depression.

They are people struggling to make ends meet, and tired - tired of the daily routine, tired of trying to get ahead, tired of all their hard work and no pay back for it.

They are people mourning the loss of a loved one. People wondering, hoping, that tomorrow might be a little better than today.

Sound familiar?

And when Jesus went ashore and saw them, that great crowd of people like that, ***He had compassion on them***. Because when He looked out at that crowd, when He looks at you now, He doesn't see strugglers, He doesn't see failures, He doesn't see people who were a disappointment to Him, He doesn't see people who should know better and do better and

be better. That's how you and I feel and think at times, or maybe a lot! But that's not what Jesus saw.

He saw people who *were like sheep without a shepherd*. Which is to say, people who needed some TLC. People who were beat up and beat down by sin, death, and the devil - and by those who were supposed to be their shepherds, but were not! He saw people wounded by sin, and scared of the evil rising up in the world. People running from their past but afraid of the future. That day, in that *desolate place*, was the flock He had come to shepherd. A flock of sad, sick, wounded, lost, confused, worried, tired, and frightened sheep.

The day had started quite differently. His twelve had just returned from the towns and villages where Jesus had sent them two-by-two, and it was time for Him to care for *them*, for an After Action Report, a debrief, and a little rest. They needed a little alone time. You know how that is. They got a little, in the boat with Jesus. But the sheep followed their shepherd, for that's what sheep do. They were in need, and knew Jesus was the one who could supply their need.

So they ran to Him. To be with the one who understood them.

Because, remember? Jesus was different. Different than the other teachers and leaders, who heaped up law after law after law. Who just told them what they needed to do and how they needed to be. Surely that was all true. But a little help would be nice! A little relief. A little compassion.

That's exactly what Jesus did! Heck, one of His closest disciples was an ex-tax collector! He didn't reject people for their mistakes or their past. He didn't just tell people to be better - He *made* them better. He didn't ignore their sin, but neither did He shame them for their sin - He forgave their sin! He seemed to know exactly what they needed. He was one of them, but also more than them. He gave them hope.

And that's what He did that day. *He began to teach them many things*, Mark says. Yes, but what He taught was hope. He taught of a loving Father. He taught of promises fulfilled. He taught of a glorious future. He taught that they were not alone, or own their own, in this sin-filled world. And He not only taught that, He did that. For then He fed them. He cared for them. For that's what Good Shepherds do.

His disciples wanted to send the people away. They meant well. They *thought* they were being compassionate. They wanted to give the people enough time to get to the surrounding villages and buy some food before it got too late; before it got dark and the shopkeepers closed up for the night. I suppose that is one kind of compassion - but not Jesus' kind; not how Jesus does things. *You give them something to eat*, Jesus said.

Now, Mark records what they said in response to this, that they didn't have anywhere close to that kind of money! But I think there was probably a moment of stunned silence first! With mouths agape and eyes wide. *Us? . . . Surely, you don't mean . . . how can we . . . you know how much that will cost? . . .*

Well, yes, as a matter of fact, Jesus *did* know. He knew that to properly care for all these people - these people and far more, infinitely more! - was going to cost *His life*. His life that He had come to lay down for them, not in that desolate place, but in a place *far more desolate* - on the cross, where, although surrounded by people, He would hang alone. Alone with the sin of the world upon Him. A burden far greater than they could imagine.

They were still learning that. They were still disciples, learners, after all. So time to learn some more. Time to learn not just about the power of God, but the *compassion* of God. A compassion far greater than their own. That for the Good Shepherd, there is no flock too large or too small for His care. Remember, not too long ago, He had stopped just to care for a single woman who had been bleeding for twelve years - *a single sheep*. Now He would provide for thousands. ***And they all ate and were satisfied.*** The food they didn't think was enough was more than enough.

First He taught them, then He fed them. Or was it really the other way around? Was His teaching really the food they needed? And was His feeding really the teaching they needed? To teach them who He was. The prophet greater than Moses, when the people were fed by manna in a desolate wilderness. The one of whom Jeremiah prophesied, who would care for His sheep and whose name is ***The Lord is our righteousness.*** The one who *opens His hands and satisfies the desires of every living thing* (Introit). And for us that means the desires of both body and soul.

Which is exactly why you have come here today. It is not because of our magnificent building! It is not for the glorious music. It is not because here are the high and mighty of the world. It is not because of the dynamic preacher. **It is because Jesus is here.** The one who has compassion. And He does not reject you, though maybe the world does. He does not condemn you, though maybe your heart does. He is not here to scold you. (I'm guessing you get enough of that already!) He is not here to ignore your sin, though, or approve of it. It's hurting you, even if you don't realize it. More than that, it's killing you. So He's here to forgive your sin. And by forgiving your sin, taking it away, give you life and love and hope.

Which is all to say He is here to feed you. With His Word, with His forgiveness, and with His very Body and Blood. It's not just one feeding here, but many. Just as that day in that desolate place.

And while maybe we'd like to see a miracle like that, feeding over 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish, truth is, this feeding here is a miracle is far greater. For

with this feeding, this food, far more than 5,000 are fed every week, from pulpits and altars and churches all over the world. The Good Shepherd caring for a worldwide flock. And yet here, too. Our little church maybe like that lone woman Jesus stopped to heal that day. We're not much, but we don't escape His notice - or His love and care.

And maybe you feel that way because *who are you?* Not very good, not very important, not very valuable. Except you are! To Jesus. He baptized you, after all. You are His child, His lamb. The one He went to the cross for. The one He comes here today for. The one He's coming again for, because He has prepared a place for you, to be with Him, forever.

And maybe that changes things a bit . . . that as you go home today, as that great crowd went home after their feeding . . . *it's not without hope*. And not just some wistful, wishful hope, but *true* hope. That you've been here with the one who can truly make a difference. Or even more, that He is with you. And that He goes with you. His care not ending at that door, but that whatever you face this week, whatever struggles you are going home to, whatever challenges still await you, you've been filled with the gifts of Jesus. **And they make a difference.** They make a difference in how you treat others, in what you say, what you do, how you live. That the darkness of the world be a little less dark, with the light and love and forgiveness of Christ given to you, now in you for others, and in others for you.

That day, in that desolate place, the Good Shepherd came and fed His flock. The promised Messiah was there. And thanks be to God, He is here for us, too, in all the desolate places we are. Wherever you are, however you are, whoever you are, take and eat, He says. You are forgiven, He says. I AM, He says, *for you*.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.