



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Finding Feasts in the Wilderness

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen

on Matthew 14:13-21 (Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21)

on Sunday, August 2, 2020 (9th Sunday of Pentecost)

I'll never forget the experience of having completed a week at Camp Christikon in Montana with 35 junior high kids. We had just had a great week in the mountains and were now heading home in the 90 degree heat of eastern Montana, chugging along in our rental bus, when the bus suddenly started huffing and puffing and then just quit. Uh oh. We were in the middle of nowhere. Eventually we got a tow into the small town of Terry, Montana. Diagnosis: transmission was shot. We'd be stuck there for three days.

Ever been in a situation like that? It says in our story today that Jesus was stuck in the middle of nowhere with 5,000 people. Now, thirty-five fourteen year-olds may not seem like a lot to you, but when you're the youth director and you're in charge of them for three days in an unscripted situation in a town you're unfamiliar with where no arrangements have been made in advance, and suddenly there are teenage guys from town hanging around because they noticed a bunch of teenage girls just showed up, and then there's the barrage of questions, "Can we go into town?" "Mind if hang out with these guys?" "What are we doing for supper?" "Where are we staying?" "I hate it here." Well, you get the idea. Suffice it to say, it suddenly seemed like I *was in charge* of 5,000 people.

Well, turns out Jesus showed up in Terry, MT – incognito - and he took care of us. First of all, a local pastor offered to put us up in their church basement. Then the town baker donated loaves and loaves of bread. The owner of the grocery store in town donated breakfast cereal, milk, hot dogs, peanut butter, and all the stuff we'd need for gourmet camp fare. Someone even loaned us a pick-up truck to take our folks to do a little sightseeing. There was a swimming pool where we could swim. The bottom line was this town took care of us and hardly charged a dime in the process. They just wanted to provide, and they did. Call it the miracle of Terry, MT! Oh yes, and

I borrowed some Dobermans to keep the townies away from our girls, so it all worked out quite well. The three days in Terry became an uplifting diversion for us because we were treated like special guests, because we believed that God had been hosting us there.

I think those 5,000 men PLUS women and children in Jesus' time experienced something they'd not soon forget either: *a glimpse of a kingdom* where all the people were healed and fed in an excess of love and generosity. Why is this important? They all lived in King Herod's kingdom where a different kind of excess was the norm: an excess of cruelty, not benevolence. In fact, right before the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus had just found out that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been executed by King Herod for daring to be the conscience of that kingdom. What, then, was Herod's response to this prophet? He presented John's head on a platter to his mistress.

The contrast between the news of John and the feeding of the 5,000 is quite intentional in Matthew's telling. First, one is reminded that upon hearing the news of his cousin, Jesus is hurting, and therefore wishes to be alone with his disciples. That is why they're in a deserted place: to get away. Well, surprise! Thousands of people who had heard or seen what Jesus had been doing followed him out there. Now, if I were Jesus, given the circumstances, I'd probably hide until they left. But what does Jesus do? He looks compassionately on them and heals the sick. No doubt, some had journeyed to him with illnesses or ailments.

But then the disciples become pragmatic. "Jesus," they say to him, "It's getting late in the day. Why don't you disburse them so they can go into one of the towns nearby and buy food." Jesus says, "You don't have to do that. Why don't *you feed* them?"

"Well, we have nothing but these five loaves and two fish." And the rest, as they say, is history. Turned out five loaves and two fish, somehow, in the hands of Jesus, was enough. More than enough. Everyone left that place full. Just like we did in Terry, MT.

So, what do we make of this story? Much has been made over the years how this story is like God providing manna centuries earlier for his chosen people to eat in the wilderness. So, too, have the similarities to the last supper been noted. Jesus holds up the elements heavenward, blesses them, and feeds everyone. This isn't just a meal

those people enjoyed that day. It was the bread of life that came down from heaven – the Lord’s Supper.

But there is much more than symbolism here. Jesus is showing us the importance of *action*. The action of loving people in their material, physical needs; of healing sick bodies and filling up empty stomachs. And he deputizes his disciples to do this.

Notice when the disciples point out to Jesus that they should disburse the crowd, Jesus doesn’t say, “Ok, ok, bring them to me so I can do my magic.” He says what? “*You* give them something to eat. Hey, I just healed a bunch of people. You step up now.” And the disciples’ response is most telling: “We have nothing. Only these five loaves and two fish.” Ah, but five loaves and two fish isn’t nothing, is it? It turns out what they thought *was nothing* was quite enough in the hands of the living God.

How often are we like that? “I can’t make a difference. I don’t have enough influence, or money, or talent, or time,” or whatever. “I have nothing.” And yet, if we offer what we have, God shows us that our offering can be a glimpse into the kingdom and the abundance of God! Think about it: anything important begins small and grows. It always starts in meager, humble fashion. How did Mitch Albom know that his decision to visit a dying man named Morrie on Tuesday would turn into a regular visit and eventually a book that would touch millions? You might have heard of it: “Tuesdays with Morrie.”

Who would’ve thought that a black woman named Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat on a bus in 1955 would begin a civil rights movement that would lead to brave men and women marching from Selma to Montgomery ten years later to demand that black people be treated like they matter. John Lewis was one of those people, and despite being nearly beaten to death for marching peacefully as he did, he kept at it, becoming perhaps Martin Luther King’s best disciple.

But, let’s face it: most people offer what they have, and it doesn’t grow into a world movement, but that’s OK. One might say, “What difference does it make for world hunger if I give only enough to feed one person?” As my seminary professor put it, “Well, it sure makes a difference for that one person, doesn’t it?” Most of the time, as we cobble together our humble offerings, we need to be content to make a difference for one person at a time, not 5,000.

This story of the feeding of the 5,000, though, is the only story that is in all four of the gospels, so it must have some serious power to it. I think, in the end, it's about offering up what we have to God, trusting that God can put it to good use. And finally, it's about action.

Jesus sees the thousands of people, sees that some of them are sick, and what does he do? He got busy. The disciples say to him, "It's dinner time. we better send them away." Jesus says, "then give them something to eat." And so, teaming with Jesus, they do just that.

Mt Carmel has recently joined with Gethsemane Lutheran in north Minneapolis as a part of the Northside Justice Fellowship. Part of our call to action has been to join them every Thursday to help with food distribution for residents of the north side. Our team has been a part of an effort through Gethsemane that served not only 5,000 people, but in the month of June, 35,715 people were served. And it all started ten years ago or so when Gethsemane started serving hotdogs and brats to their neighbors and working with Cub Foods to broker massive donations of food for the northside. We're now a part of that effort. And the book study group that starts this Thursday is picking up the "justice" part of "northside justice fellowship." Reading books about the history of racism in our country is a small offering that opens eyes and leads to action.

Mt Carmel is a church of action, I believe. Not a place that likes vague talk and platitudes. Our hands are tied a little bit now with taking action as the pandemic wears on, but that doesn't mean we can't get ready for a new day when things allow us meet in person again. We already have the gifts present that we need to grow our community, ministry and mission.

For instance, we have a wonderful kitchen, a big fellowship hall with really cool tiles on the floor, a fresh paint job that uses the colors of our stained glass windows, and a sculpture of Jesus that pretty much says two things: "You are welcome," and, "I am the bread of life."

Well, now, I wonder what we're supposed to do with that? Prepare to act, my friends. To build our community and reach out to the neighborhood.

And I hope you wonder – everyday - what offerings you have to feed, encourage and bring healing to the neighbors in your life. Amen.