Sermon, August 6, 2023

Matthew 14: 13-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In Matthew’s gospel, we find out in chapter 4 that John the Baptist is arrested. It happens just after Jesus begins his public ministry after his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness by the Devil.

Matthew then tells us about Jesus’ ministry. Jesus moves to Galilee, away from Jerusalem where John has been imprisoned. Jesus goes throughout that region, gathering disciples and teaching in the synagogues. He proclaims the good news of the kingdom and cures every disease and sickness among the people.

From chapter five through chapter 14, Jesus preaches the sermon on the mount, gives instruction about the kingdom life through proclamations and parables and cures the sick. Most of the time, great crowds travel with him and gather wherever he stops to speak

Jesus’ reputation as a great teacher and healer grows by the day. It is not unnoticed by Herod, who has arrested John the Baptist. Herod had John arrested not for his preaching but because he had spoken about him.

John had accused him of breaking the law, for Herod had taken his brother’s wife after he had divorced his first wife. Herod decided not to have him killed, for he was afraid of the crowds who thought he was a prophet.

However, Herod’s wife had other plans. She uses her daughter to make a deal with Herod. She had her dance before Herod and his friends. When she pleased him, he said he would give her anything she wanted. As told by her mother, she asked for John’s head on a platter.

After John’s disciples bury John, they come to tell Jesus of his fate. When he hears the sad news, he withdraws in a boat to a deserted place by himself. Jesus wants to grieve for his cousin and to reflect on his life and ministry.

But before he can even make land, the crowds hear where he was and intercept him by walking to the shore. When he steps ashore, the crowd is waiting for him.

Jesus turns from his grief to meet their needs. There is nothing he can do for John. But he can do something for those in front of him. He cures their sick and spends the day with them.

Darkness begins to fall and the crowds remain. The disciples, probably with stomach’s growling themselves, tell Jesus to tell them to go home. Or at least go to the nearby village to get some dinner.

Out there in the middle of nowhere, the disciples want no responsibility for all those people. They can’t possibly provide enough for all of them. It’s time to get out of there.

But Jesus tells them to let them stay. They don’t have to go away, for they’ll be able to feed them.

They respond with…yeah, right. We have five loaves of bread and two fish. That is obviously not enough to even feed the 13 of us, let alone this crowd.

Jesus takes their meager fare and has the crowd sit on the grass. When they are comfy, he holds the fish and bread and looks to heaven. He looks to the one who will provide for the people in his love and compassion.

He prays over the food and breaks apart the loaves. He gives them to the disciples who then give them to the people seated before them. When the picnic is over and everyone is full, they begin to collect the left-overs. Twelve baskets of broken pieces remain.

This is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels. There are some differences between them. In John, a boy brings five barley loaves and two fish. In Mark, the disciples worry that they don’t have enough money to buy food for everyone. In Luke, the disciples are to divide the crowd into groups of 50.

But the actions of Jesus are the same. The food is brought to him, he blesses it, breaks it and gives it to the disciples to distribute. This is the pattern for communion today….the bread and wine are brought to the table, blessed and broken, and given to all.

Is this a story to explain more about Holy Communion? Perhaps it is. Communion is a foretaste of the feast to come. Where this meal on earth was simple, as our meal at communion is simple bread and wine, the feast in heaven will be sumptuous. Here at our table, the meal is sumptuous for it is Jesus offering himself to us, supplying us with heavenly food because of his love and compassion.

It is also a story about God’s care and provision. We may think of the parallel between this feeding of the hungry with the story of the manna and quails for the Israelites in the wilderness. God provided them with all they needed to be filled.

In 2 Kings, chapter 4, Elisha shares 20 loaves of barley bread with 100. He doesn’t believe it will provide enough for them, but they end up with left-overs, too. The God who empowers Elisha to feed 100 now empowers Jesus to feed 5000.

Elisha has his followers gather the left-overs into baskets. Jesus has his disciples to the same. The disciples collect 12 baskets full. More often than not, numbers are important in biblical stories.

As God provided for the 12 tribes of Israel, now God provides for the 12 disciples. From these broken pieces, will come God’s provision for the church’s mission. They will be find their sustenance in Jesus as the one who feeds them.

Each of these stories is often called….the feeding of the 5000. Matthew increases the magnitude of the miracle by not stopping at 5000. He adds women and children, over and above that number. No one is excluded from partaking of this holy meal.

People like to try to explain this miracle. One explanation is that the people were so moved by Jesus words and actions, that they shared the food they had in their pockets or travel bags. However, the words of Jesus were of a new authority never heard before and his actions were healing the sick with just a word. Why could he not make fish and bread multiply to feed thousands?

Since all four gospel writers include this story, it is apparently very important for their readers and for us. While the other gospels place this story after the return of the disciples from a mission trip, Matthew places it after the many teachings and healings from Jesus. It is also after he finds out John the Baptist has been murdered.

The murder of John the Baptist doesn’t stop Jesus’ ministry. His mission, as Matthew describes it, must continue…to preach the good news of the kingdom of God and to cure every disease and sickness.

Jesus heals all who come to him in the crowds along the shore. He feeds them, men and women and children. There is no distinction except that they come with a need. The feast they come to is without cost, as it says in Isaiah. If they thirst, there is water. If they hunger, there is food.

The crowds came with nothing but leave satisfied, both in their stomachs and in their hearts and minds. Jesus told his disciples to feed them. They brought what they had and depended on Jesus to use it.

Like the disciples, we ask, where are we to get enough bread to feed so great a crowd? Where are we to get enough to feed ourselves? Where are we to get enough to feed those around us?

It is in the unfathomable depths of Christ where we begin. Like the disciples, we offer up what resources we have and in trust and faith, however negligible and small, we look to him for the miracle to repeat itself again and again.

It repeats itself when our packages of paper towels or paper cups provide resources for pre-school children. It repeats itself when a towel, soap, nail clipper, comb and toothbrush is given to a person who has had every resource stripped from them. It repeats itself when we mention our small but mighty church in the grocery line and the person behind us makes a mental note to visit on Sunday. It repeats itself when we offer words of encouragement or consolation or even sit in silence with a hurting person.

How amazing that God has chosen to make us part of the miracle. He chooses us to work with him, to let him work through us, to make a difference in a world that is so set to go against everything that God is about.

We come with nothing that can compare to what God gives to us. Thankfully, God is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. With his provision, we give what we can offer, our selves, our time and our possessions. In Jesus hands, that ends up being more than enough. Amen.