

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 22, 2018
Pentecost 9
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 57:15-21
Psalm 22:22-30
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-44

In today's Gospel lesson, we find the disciples returning from their ministry mission that Jesus commissioned them to undertake from last week's Gospel reading. Today they report back to Jesus about all that has occurred on their little "ministry tour."

So many people are following them that things are chaotic, and so Jesus tells the disciples, "Let's get away for a while and rest." Mark then says, "They left by boat for a quieter spot."

The language here is telling. The word used here for "quieter spot" is the word *eremos*. It is the same word that appears just a few verses later when the disciples call it a "desolate place." This word is used frequently in Mark, and with great intention.

At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, John the Baptist cries out in the "wilderness" and calls on people to prepare the way for the Lord.

It is this same John who goes out into the "wilderness" (the desert) to baptize people in preparation for the coming Messiah.

After John baptizes Jesus, the Spirit leads Jesus out into the “wilderness,” where for forty days Jesus does battle with Satan, emerging victorious.

Some scholars see in Jesus’ victorious encounter in the wilderness the *restoring of Eden*, reminiscent of when Adam was safely together with all of the beasts in Genesis (Gen. 2:18-20).

It would be no accident, then, that the *desert* would now be a place of refuge and prayer for Jesus and his disciples. He can call on the disciples here to go off to a quiet place (the “desert”) because the desert has been tamed by his power. And that is precisely what he does.

He calls on his disciples to come to the desert in order to *rest*. Once again, we must look closely at Mark’s language. The word Mark uses here for *rest* is the word used in the Greek Old Testament for the Sabbath rest commanded by God in the Third Commandment (cf. Ex. 23:12; Deut. 5:14).

In the Scriptures, the Sabbath Rest is emblematic of the perfect rest that the saints enjoy in eternity, where Satan has been conquered and sickness and death are no more (cf. Hebrews 4:1-13). It could be that Jesus, in inviting his disciples to come away and *rest*, is about to give them a foretaste of the heavenly rest that awaits them when God’s kingdom (that they have been proclaiming) will come in its fullness.

When Jesus and his disciples get out of the boat, the crowd is so vast that Jesus is moved with compassion. To him they seem “like sheep without a shepherd.”

And again we must pay attention to Mark’s language. This phrase, “like sheep without a shepherd,” is not original to Mark. It is a phrase found throughout the Old Testament when Israel’s leadership has failed and been derelict (cf. Num. 27:17; I Kgs 22:17; Ez. 34:8; Zech. 10:2). In such cases, God himself promises to shepherd His people *directly*. This is most powerfully recorded in a prophecy of Ezekiel, where the prophet has God say:

Behold, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a Shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel...I will feed them with good pasture...There they shall lie down in good grazing land..I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down,” says the Lord God. (Ez. 34:12-15)

It seems clear, at least from Mark’s description of what is happening here, that Jesus is the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Jesus is God himself, come to shepherd and feed His people. Ezekiel’s prophecy is the key to understanding the feeding miracle that comes next. It helps us to read the feeding miracle *Eucharistically*.

First, notice that this incident takes place in the *desert*, what the disciples call a “desolate place.” We’ve already mentioned this. But it was also the *desert*

where God fed the children of Israel manna from heaven (Ex. 16). God fed the Israelites with what the Psalmist called “the bread of angels” (Ps. 78:24-25).

Next, notice that Jesus has the people “sit down in groups.” The translation here is rather weak, for the word Mark uses here is the word “recline.” This is suggestive of a banquet, because Jews in that day usually reclined to eat. And the arranging of people into groups is reminiscent of the children of Israel who were arranged in groups when God fed them in the desert.

Not only do the people recline, but Mark says that they recline “on green grass.” This calls to mind Ezekiel’s prophecy, and demonstrates that the Eucharist is a participation of the coming of God’s kingdom, which is an eternal spring time.

Finally, Jesus uses the language of the Eucharist to bless the bread and the fish. He *takes* the bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to the disciples to distribute.

This feeding miracle is so important that it is the only miracle story recorded in all four Gospels. But have you ever wondered why it was *five* loaves of bread and *two* fish that were the raw materials for the miracle?

Without bogging down in detail or majoring in “minors,” there are instances in the history of the Church where the question has been asked and answered. St. Anthony of Padua, a Church Father from the third century, had a thought about the bread. He said: “The five loaves represent the five books of Moses, in which we

find five refreshments for the soul.” (*Sermons for Sundays and Festivals*, Vol. 1, trans. Paul Spilsbury

(Padua, IT: Edizioni Messaggero Padova, 2007, 180-181)

And what of the two fish? There is evidence from multiple Church Fathers that the number *two* here indicates that the Church fed by Jesus’ Eucharist includes *both Jews and Gentiles*. (Paul describes this in the epistle lesson.)

Further, it’s possible that the fish symbolizes Jesus himself. The Greek symbol *Ichthus* (the fish drawn with two simple curved lines) is an acrostic that means “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior.” (Cf. the ancient Fathers Tertullian [AD 155-225] and Clement of Alexandria [AD 150-215]).

So, let me try to bring all of this together. As God provided the children of Israel “food in abundance” in the Old Covenant, so here Jesus provides the crowds a *super-abundance*, more than they can possibly consume, satisfying all with twelve baskets left over.

Jesus, as the true successor to Moses who led and fed the children of Israel, has come to lead and feed the *New Israel*, which is the Church (Cf. Paul in the epistle lesson). Jesus has come to feed his gathered people as Ezekiel’s promised Shepherd. *And he does so through the Eucharist*. The twelve baskets of “leftovers” demonstrate the continued abundance Jesus will provide his Church -- the New Israel -- built upon the twelve apostles and led by their successors.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, these tangible symbols of bread and wine seem so small, so insignificant. So powerless in and of themselves to do much of anything. But come back with me in the service to the offering, where our gifts of food, money, bread and wine are brought forward.

Do you remember what we say? I say: *All things come from You, O Lord.*
And you say: *And of your own have we given You.*

Those words are not window dressing. They are not rhetorical "filler" so that we can take an offering. In fact, something is happening at that point in the liturgy that is critical to all that we do.

In bringing our offerings forward, the bread and wine symbolize the offering of our whole lives back to God. The ancient liturgies say: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have this bread to offer You, fruit of the earth and work of human hands. It shall become the bread of life."

And of the wine the ancient liturgy says: "Blessed are You, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have this wine to offer you, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It shall become our spiritual drink."

Now, to be clear, God does not need our gifts. God does not need our little offerings. He is God. So why do we bring them? In fact, why are we commanded to bring them? Why do we offer back to God what God has given us?

Because it is a principle throughout Scripture (illustrated here in the Gospel lesson) that when we bring our lives and resources and gifts and offer them back to God who has given them to us, *they return to us enhanced, changed, and magnified*. And in the process, we are changed and transformed.

As we come to the Table, let us come as those who *this day* are here to offer our whole lives back to God. As a congregation, let us come as one, bringing our meager resources of time, talent, and treasure to Christ. In complete dependence on him, let us pray that our offerings will return to us magnified and multiplied, so that we may continue to offer the healing love of Jesus to a hurting world.

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