

“To Feed the World”

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - July 25, 2021

Psalm 14 ~ Ephesians 3:14-21 ~ John 6:1-14

How many of you remember Woodstock? For those who don't, Woodstock was a rock music festival in the summer of 1969. I was seventeen at the time and there was no way in the world that my parents were going to let me go. They were not too thrilled when I went to see the Woodstock movie the next summer. Woodstock was the high point of the hippie "make love, not war" movement. The performers were the bright stars of '60's rock: Jimi Hendrix, Joe Crocker, the Who, the Grateful Dead, and many more. The organizers expected around 10,000 people to gather at Max Yasgur's Farm near the small town of Bethel, New York, but almost half a million came. It could have been a disaster, but people shared their food freely with one another, so everyone had enough. Unfortunately, they also shared their alcohol and drugs. As John says in our gospel today, "There was a great deal of grass in the place." But even with the wild unexpected multitude and torrential rains, there was no violence. It was a big old sloppy mess, but no one deliberately hurt anyone.

For the next few weeks, we will be hearing the story of one of the "happenings" of Jesus' generation: the feeding of the five thousand. One commentator calls it "The Big Picnic." It is the only miracle of Jesus reported by all four gospels. It is the story of an unexpected multitude. In John it becomes the occasion for an extended discussion on the meaning of communion. John sees the event as a gathering of the church around the table of Christ, which is always a miraculous feeding. He alone notes that it happened about the time of the Passover, and John goes on to present Jesus as God's Passover lamb in the way he tells the story of the cross. In fact, John has no story of that last Passover supper that Jesus shares with his disciples like the other gospels do. Instead, he places Jesus' reflections on communion here ... in connection with the feeding of the five thousand. So, for John, this happening is not "The Big Picnic" but the big "Worship Service," and the meal is a communion celebration anticipating Jesus' death and resurrection as well as the great banquet in God's heaven to come.

In John's story, Jesus and the disciples go up on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, which is surrounded by hills with lovely views. A crowd follows them because they have heard about Jesus and want to meet him ... hear him ... be healed by him the way they have heard that others, too have been healed. Jesus sees this unexpected crowd, and asks: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

Jesus' first concern is for the physical need of the multitude. There is no discussion of who deserves to be there and who does not. There is no complaint about how the crowd ought to be responsible for their own food and not cause such problems for the rest ... or even of how they must listen to a sermon first before they can be fed. The only criterion to be included in this feast is their hunger. And the only issue is quantity. Where can we get enough? How can we redistribute the supply to get bread to everyone who needs it today?

Now, I want to caution you not to spiritualize this story too quickly. Clearly this story has spiritual dimensions for John. Later Jesus will refuse to do miracles on demand when the crowds want to turn him into their chief cook and grocer. Later Jesus will talk about himself as "the bread of life" that all people need. We do not live by bread alone. But neither do we live without bread for our bodies, and Jesus' first concern is for the physical hunger of the multitude. The two are connected, of course, for how can you speak of spiritual hunger to people whose bodies are desperate for food? How can you speak of God's love and come to this table of grace thanking God for your abundance when you are not sharing your abundance with those who don't have enough?

For human beings eating is always both a physical and a spiritual experience. Every table is a place of spiritual and relational intimacy or sometimes, painful division and loneliness. Of course, that is also true of the Lord's table, which we will celebrate next week. The communion symbols of bread and wine are first of all, a reminder of God's basic provision for our lives. Christians say grace at meals because we recognize the Source of our sustenance and make this connection of material and spiritual life. We recognize our dependence on God and one another, for we never eat a meal that God has not provided, and we never eat a meal that others have not labored to make possible. This is true at our family tables, at our church suppers, but especially at communion.

The earliest word used for this supper was "eucharist," the Greek word for thanksgiving, after the prayer of gratitude which always preceded it. It is also called "the Lord's Supper," because we do this "in remembrance" of Christ. But my favorite word for it is "communion," because we are joined with one another ... and with God ... at this table. When we gather here, we are joined to all the souls who have ever shared communion in all times and places. We are all part of the one body of Christ. And at this table we are joined to Christ. But we cannot be joined to Christ without being filled with the compassion of Christ for those who have not shared in God's table.

We cannot come to the table without remembering Jesus' story about the King who held a banquet. The first people invited refused with lame excuses. They took their inclusion at the

table for granted. They did not need the King ... or his table ... or recognize the benevolent source of their own prosperity. So, the King sent his servants out to the highways and byways and told them to invite everyone in ... the poor and maimed ... the blind and the lame ... until his house was filled. Once again, the only criterion for their inclusion was their hunger. Some of us are the first guests in that story ... privileged by birth and taking too lightly our invitation to the table. And some of us are the latecomers ... limping in wounded by life ... surprised and grateful to be included in the feast. Most of all, I think we are supposed to be the servants ... going out to the highways and byways and inviting everyone to come in.

Philip responds to Jesus with typical helplessness and hopelessness. "Jesus, six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little" (John 6:7). He feels badly, but there is nothing he can do. I understand Philip. I feel overwhelmed at times as well. I want to feed the multitude, but I don't have the resources to do it. But that is an excuse. Jesus doesn't want us to feel bad about their hunger, because our guilt won't feed a single soul. An unnamed child is our model of what the disciples of Christ do. A little boy offers his lunch of five loaves and two fishes. For five thousand people? What folly! But Andrew gives it to Jesus. And Jesus feeds the five thousand with it. Some have suggested that Jesus used the little boy's example to encourage the rest of the crowd to share what they had, kind of like Woodstock, and the miracle was that people were willing to share their bread with those who had none. Wouldn't that be a miracle in our time? Whatever happened on that hillside, we know this ... everybody had enough to eat because a child shared his lunch with a disciple who put it in Jesus' hands.

Miracles all have beginnings, and almost always those beginnings are to be found within us. I once heard the story of a man named Paul. Paul had received a special pre-Christmas gift from his brother. It was a beautiful new car ... fully loaded and ready to go. On Christmas Eve, when Paul came out of his office, a street kid was walking around the shiny new car, admiring it. "Is this your car, mister?" the kid asked. When he replied that it was, and that his brother had given it to him for Christmas, the boy said, "You mean your brother gave it to you, and it didn't cost you anything? Free? For Nothing? Gosh, I wish..." The boy hesitated, and Paul knew what he was about to say. He had heard it many times over the past few days. He was going to wish that he had a brother like that. But what the boy said shocked Paul. "I wish", the boy said, "I wish that I could be a brother like that." We can be a brother like that. Or a sister like that. All it takes is that we offer ourselves ... and what we have ... to God. All it takes is that we cease to worry about how little we have and begin instead to think about what it is that we can offer.

Tim Staker shares the story of two Jesuit priests who were assigned to a parish in Tacoma, Washington in 1976. They were walking from the parish office to their quarters one evening, when they saw two men, Fred and Greg, standing outside the church gym waiting for an event that wouldn't begin for another hour. Fred was 55 and Greg was 26. Both suffered from mental disabilities, had already spent years in state institutions and were living in a halfway house nearby. The priests invited them in for a quick meal. And that was that ... except. The next night at dinner time, Fred and Greg came knocking at the door. The priests shared dinner with them again. And this continued, four of five nights a week for eight months until it seemed Fred and Greg were part of the family. Finally, one of the priests suggested to the other, "Maybe God is asking us to let Fred and Greg live with us." Well, they did some planning and got some college students involved. Soon more people with disabilities came along. The parish purchased several homes and a small farm. They set up some work programs and eventually established a branch of L'Arche or "The Ark," a network of compassionate ministries to the mentally handicapped and disabled. It all started with one shared meal.

The Lord's Supper is always a shared meal. It is communion! But how wide is our circle? How far will we share the bounty that God has given us? If the hippies could do it at Woodstock, surely the church of the compassionate Christ can feed the hungry, too.

May we pray?

Blessed are you, Lord God, Sovereign of the universe, who has given us bread from the earth and the fruit of the vine to sustain our souls. Blessed are you, Lord God, Sovereign of the universe, who has included us and forgiven us and renewed us at the table of your grace. Blessed are you, Lord God, Sovereign of the universe, who has given us each other and made a place for us at the table where we share the communion of the saints. Fill us with the compassion of Christ that we may intentionally, joyfully, graciously invite others to this table, too, and by the power of your love feed the world in the name of Christ. Amen.