



Hear the Word

from Pastor Shelley Bryan Wee

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

August 6, 2017

Matthew 14:13-21

There are two feasts, parties, banquets, dinners in today's gospel. The first banquet is Herod's.

You see, right before today's gospel reading is the story of Herod throwing a party. And in this party his stepdaughter/niece was dancing before him and he was enjoying her dancing so much that he said, "I'll give you anything you want." And the little dancing girl, prompted by her mother, said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." And Herod wanted to show the people gathered there that he has ultimate power. That he had the ability to do anything he wanted. That he wasn't going to be upstaged by this little girl or even her mother, so John was beheaded and his head was brought on a platter and given to the little girl, who brought it to her mother, and it was on display for all those at the party to see.

This is the first feast, the first banquet, the first party in today's gospel. And when Jesus hears this horrible news he goes to a "deserted place by himself," probably to pray, to grieve, to weep, to reflect.

But, the draw of Jesus is so magnetic, he can't get away. The crowds see the direction the boat is headed ... and they follow – 5000, 10,000, 20,000? Who knows how many ... the scripture says 5000 men plus women and children. In any case, these people come out of villages and they join the growing crowd. They come together to find the one they have heard about. They look for the one who has compassion and healing power. They gather in expectation. And Jesus, in spite of, or perhaps because of, his grief, has compassion on them and he comes ashore and he blesses and he heals and he loves.

And so we come to the second feast, the second banquet, the second party that we hear about today.

A banquet that is so important it is recorded in every single gospel. To think about this – think about some of the other stories we know: Matthew and Luke are the only gospel writers who record Jesus' birth. John is the only one who tells the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. The Sermon on the Mount is only found in Matthew. Luke is the only one with the Good Samaritan story. All important, impactful stories. But this feast story today? All four writers include is the miraculous feeding of 5000.

Let's face it, though. This amazing feast doesn't start off very well. Compared to that feast Herod must have had? The tables groaning with food. The wine copiously poured. The feast Jesus is serving doesn't seem much like a feast at all.

You have all of these hungry people. Sitting there all day. And then you have the disciples. And they are exhausted. And hungry themselves. And just done with people. And they probably just want to eat and go to bed. So they encourage Jesus to bring this healing thing to a close and send the crowds off to the surrounding villages, so these people can find something to eat on their own. But when they tell Jesus to get rid of the crowds he says to them, "They have no need to go. You give them something to eat."

Can't you hear the groans and see the eye-rolling that must have happened between the men as they say back to him, "Give them something to eat? Us? Really? All we have are two salted fish and five loaves of bread. This is hardly a snack for twelve men let alone 5000 men, plus their children and wives. No disrespect, Jesus, but you are not making sense. And this isn't what we signed up for. And can't we just keep this food for ourselves?"

The disciples were right. There wasn't enough food. By anyone's estimate this wasn't enough food ... think about it ... five loaves and two fish ...that is one loaf of bread for every 1000 men, plus their wives and children.

But something happens when Jesus takes the bread and blesses and breaks it and gives it to the disciples. Something happens as the disciples are sharing those five loaves and two fish with the people gathered. I don't know how Jesus did it. Was it a miracle of multiplication? Did those fish and those loaves keep multiplying as they passed from hand to hand? If you were in the crowd, did you see one loaf left in the basket and as you reached for it, did it suddenly become ten loaves, twenty, thirty?

Or was it a miracle of generosity? Did Jesus and his generosity set off a reaction so that those who had brought food for themselves, never intending to share, did they suddenly begin sharing with the person in front of them, behind them, beside them? Again, we are not told how this miracle happened, only that everyone ate, everyone was filled, and there was more food left over than when they began.

Really, what is more important than "how" this miracle worked is the "why." Because of Jesus' deep love for the suffering of each person in this crowd, he healed those who were sick, he fed those who were hungry. Whether this miracle of feeding more than 5000 people happened because Jesus miraculously multiplied the loaves or because by showing compassion, a different sort of miracle happened with people sharing their resources ... whatever happened on that hillside was a miracle. It is such an amazing, extravagant story that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all made sure the story was written down in their gospels in order to show the amazing extravagance of God through Jesus. What a feast. What a banquet. What a party it must have been.

And it moved that crowd from sickness to wellness, from scarcity to abundance, from hoarding to sharing, from hunger to fullness; you could say that it moved that crowd from death to life.

So what about us? What does this story have to say to us? We who are hungry. We who eat too much. We who hoard. We who don't have enough. We who look for power. We who look for healing, for love, for food, for life.

It's choosing what feast we want to attend. A feast where lots of food and drink and explicit power hide greed and grasping and scarcity. A feast where power is only gained through the exploitation and killing of another.

Or a feast where Jesus looks out at the thousands of people, he looks at his twelve disciples, he looks at two fish and five loaves, and he sees a party, a feast, a banquet full of possibilities. The disciples didn't get this. Not until the end of this feast of Jesus' did they understand what they were a part of. But at the end ... They gathered twelve baskets of food. Twelve! They shared a little bit of food ... and they received basket upon basket in return.

A feast for everyone who is sick, who is poor, who is hungry. A feast for those who think they don't have enough, however much they have. A feast to open one's hands rather than grasping in fear. A feast of healing, a feast of love. For each and every one of us, together, in community, together as the body of Christ.

I understand that we are having a feast of our own today. After worship we are gathering and having biscuits and gravy, am I right? I am looking forward to that. But before that, we are having another feast. Today when we receive this bread and wine, we are receiving a taste of the feast, the banquet, the party to come. We are receiving the one who stops at nothing to be with us: to heal us, to feed us. Jesus gives to us nothing less than himself. And in this feast that we are invited to, we receive not only a small piece of bread and a sip of wine, we receive Jesus – the giver of bread, the giver of life, the bread of life – truly the One who fills us, who satisfies us to the end, the extravagant Savior.

The one who fills us so that we may go out and do the same for all we meet.

This story today is about two feasts. Two types of power. Two ways of being in this world.

One is grasping for power. Holding on to power. Killing for power.

One is giving everything away. And in giving, receiving everything.

Which feast do you choose?

Amen.