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Grace Episcopal Church, Bath Maine
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Proper 13 Year A
Matthew 14:13-21

There's a mathematical equation in church circles that says it takes two Church ladies standing by the coatrack about 5 minutes to plan a meal for 100 people. You know who you are.

Give those ladies, our ladies, a couple of hours, a church directory, a calendar and a pad of paper, I think they could probably manage to feed 5,000 people on pretty short notice.

Feeding is an act of hospitality. Offering food acknowledges the humanity and the vulnerability of the other. We can technically survive a while without food as long as we have water, but as most of us know, life gets pretty uncomfortable without food after just a few hours.

To feed others is more than to wish them well; to feed others is to insure their wellbeing and ultimately, their survival.

Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place, by himself. He didn't take the apostles. He didn't even take his mother. Still the people stream to the shore from the towns, following him along the shore. They have precedent to do this; in the previous chapter Jesus is preaching several parables from a boat to those standing on shore.

Jesus sees the crowds gathering and scripture says he had compassion on them. He came ashore and began to heal them. Can you picture it?

Kids are playing and babies are crying; the healed are weeping with joy; families are helping their sick towards the rabbi. The disciples are probably practicing crowd control. Some people are cooling off with their feet in the water. Some people might be singing.

The sun begins to set and the disciples approach Jesus. “These people are getting hungry. Send them away to the villages to get food.” We can read their minds. “Please don’t make these hungry people our problem. It’s been a long day. We’re tired.” We are always tempted to avoid the hard part of following Jesus, aren’t we?

Then Jesus tells his disciples, “You feed them.” Um, yeah, no, we have 5 loaves of bread and two fish. And we aren’t running to town at this hour.” For Jesus, material lack is not an obstacle. He feeds them.

Whom does Jesus feed? Everyone. What litmus test of faith or virtue did he require of the people before he fed them? None.

The feeding of the 5000 is not a Las Vegas magic show trick or mega church spectacle. It is a meal that has echoes in Exodus 16 and foreshadows the Last Supper and the Messianic Feast.

In Exodus 16, the Israelites have escaped the Egyptians and crossed the Red Sea, which Moses parted. They thirsted and God provided 12 springs of water in Elim where they could camp under the trees and refresh themselves. You think they might have trusted God by now, but then they get hungry and all bets are off.

The Israelites say, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Ex 16:3). We were enslaved and oppressed, but at least the food was good.

God says to Moses, “Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you” (Ex 16:4). God provides.

Trust is not a condition of God providing. Our good behavior, our piety, is not a condition of God providing. God just provides, out of God’s eternal outpouring of goodness.

The Jewish apocalyptic text II Baruch reads, “And it shall come to pass at that self-same time that the treasury of manna shall again descend from on high, and they will eat of it in those years, because these are they who have come to the consummation of time” (29.8).

We read of Elijah in II Kings, “A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat.’ But his servant said, ‘How can I set this before a hundred people?’ So he repeated, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD: They shall eat and have some left.’ He set it before them; they ate and had some left, according to the word of the LORD” (4:42-44).

Isaiah 25: 6-8 speaks of the Messianic Banquet:

“On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

. . . he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.”

The Messianic Feast is a glorious meal prepared by God for us in heaven. We hear of it in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus says, “many will come from east and west and will take their places at the banquet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11).

God took on a body; ate and drank, feasted and fed. Even after he rose from the dead, he made a fire and cooked fish on the shore. He could have asked us to remember him with burnt offerings or grain offerings or candles and incense or sacred dance, but instead he asked us to remember him with a meal.

Liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrop writes, “. . . this Christian continuation of meal-keeping has deep roots in the many layers of the Jesus tradition. To eat this meal in the community is to continue what began in the life of Jesus, who came eating and drinking, held meals with sinners, spoke of the dominion of God as a wedding feast, and interpreted his own death as a meal. For the community the meal is the very presence of Jesus himself” (*Holy Things*, 43-4).

The meal we will share together shortly is divinely ordained, provided by God through Jesus at the Last Supper. At the altar we celebrate all that God has done for us, and offer our trust in God to continue to provide. Like the bustling crowds on the shore, whatever need you bring to communion, you receive the very presence and care of Jesus.

Whatever your current worries, whether health or children or grandchildren, finances or concern for the state of the world, trust that God will provide. Throughout the course of history, God has promised provision.

The offering and receiving of care in this world is a foretaste of the wholeness and completeness that await us in God’s kingdom.

Even in what appeared to be scarcity, Jesus indiscriminately offered the crowds compassion, healing and more than enough food to whomever needed it. Go and do likewise.