

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

St. John 6:1-15: "Jesus Never Sends the Hungry Away Empty."

March 10/11, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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Lord God, heavenly Father, who through Your Son in the desert abundantly fed thousands with little, we humbly ask You, visit us also with Your blessing, and preserve us from covetousness and cares of the body, that we may seek first Your kingdom and righteousness and that we may experience Your fatherly goodness in all things needful for soul and body; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 90)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following Him, because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up His eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward Him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. / Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" / Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. / And when they had eaten their fill, He told His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that He had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" / Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by Himself. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, whose abundant grace is richly supplied for our spiritual nourishment, dear fellow redeemed:

As much as you and I want to be helpful and loving toward our neighbors, the feeling of exhaustion can occur with any of us. We might feel as though we have given all we can, but more and more keeps getting asked of us. This can happen in the home when children expect their parents to do everything for them and complain if things don't go their way. It can happen at work where greater productivity is demanded but without the resources needed to do the

job. When we feel we are being taken advantage of and have to carry everyone else's burdens, this can put us on edge and lead to burnout. And then we can also feel like failures for what we have not accomplished or for our less than cheerful attitude.

In this state, it is important to take a step back, even if certain tasks must be left undone for a while. Some "recharge" with alone time; others seek out a few faithful friends. But it is also good for us to remember the means God provides for our renewal. In the divine service, He gives forgiveness and strength through His absolution, the preaching of the Gospel, and the administration of the Lord's Supper. And in private, He invites us to unburden ourselves through prayer and personal meditation on His Word.

## I

Even Jesus went off by Himself from time to time. There was a constant need for His teaching, more people to heal, and more demons to cast out, but these waited while Jesus spent time in meditation and prayer. The reason Jesus "*went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee*" in today's text is because He had just received the news of John's the Baptizer's beheading. John had baptized Jesus and declared Him to be "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (Jn. 1:29). Jesus said about John that he was "*more than a prophet,*" and that "*among those born of women none is greater than John*" (Lk. 7:26,28).

This great prophet was killed because a bad king made a promise he should not have. What an injustice this was! What wickedness is done to the servants of God in this fallen world! When Jesus heard the news, He withdrew by boat to a desolate place by Himself (Mk. 14:13), with His disciples not far from Him. They had all been so busy assisting people who "*were coming and going,*" that "*they had no leisure even to eat*" (Mk. 6:31).

But the crowds still followed. In fact, when some saw them get into the boat, they ran along the shore and got to the other side before Jesus and His disciples did. I can imagine them feeling annoyed and put out by this: "Can't you people give us a little break! Can't your troubles wait for a day or two!" The disciples may have felt this way, but Jesus did not. The evangelist Mark writes that "*When [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd*" (Mk. 6:34). He did not tell them to leave, or try to get away from them. He had compassion on them.

At no point in Jesus' ministry do we see Him turn away those who came to Him for help. The closest is when He seemed to ignore the request of the Canaanite woman to heal her daughter (Mt. 15:21-28). But even then, He did not tell her to go away and leave Him alone. He tested her faith and then granted her request. As He Himself promised—and He cannot lie—"*whoever comes to me I will never cast out*" (Jn. 6:37).

So in that desolate place by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus "*healed their sick*" (Mt. 14:14) and "*began to teach them many things*" (Mk. 6:34), including teachings about "*the kingdom of God*" (Lk. 9:11). These were souls hungry for encouragement, hungry to hear the truth. They were like wandering sheep, and Jesus had the food they needed. He is the Good Shepherd, who leads His sheep to rest in green pastures and find renewal beside still waters. This happens through the Word. Through His powerful Word, Jesus restores each hungry and hurting soul. As His mother Mary sang, the Lord "*has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away*

*empty*" (Lk. 1:53). The spiritually weak and needy are well filled, while the spiritually self-centered and self-secure are sent away empty.

## II

But the needs of the crowd by the Sea of Galilee were more than spiritual, which is also true for us. We have physical needs. This is how God made us. In order for our bodies to function, in order to survive, we need food and drink. The people were so eager to listen to Jesus that they seemed to have forgotten their physical needs for a time. But Jesus did not.

The disciples advised Jesus to send the people away, so they could find food for themselves. He replied, *"You give them something to eat"* (Mt. 6:37). Philip said, *"Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."* Andrew chimed in that a boy there had five barley loaves and two fish, *"but what are they for so many?"* Their responses showed they did not even consider how Jesus could help in feeding the great crowd.

We are guilty of the same thing when we have a problem or need that we do not know how to solve. Instead of trusting that God will provide, we let ourselves be consumed by worry and stress. We complain. We take our anxiety out on the people around us. How many times has a scenario like that played out in your life? Only once in a great while, or more frequently?

And what happened to that need or trouble that caused such anguish? Half the time, we don't even remember—something that seemed so desperately important then, is now all but forgotten. The times we do remember, we see how God recognized our need and well provided for us, even in ways we could not have imagined. It should not surprise us that the Lord would do this for His precious sheep. He loves us (ELH 177, v. 1). How could He fail to help us? As King David said, *"I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread"* (Ps. 37:25).

Jesus was not going to send the children begging for bread in the wilderness. He gratefully received the five loaves of bread and two fish from the boy, gave thanks to God for them, and proceeded to divide and distribute them among the people gathered there. There were 5,000 men present, along with an untold number of women and children. All of them had their fill, eating as much as they wanted. At Jesus' direction so nothing would be wasted, the leftover fragments were gathered and filled twelve baskets! It was a great miracle, and also a great lesson about how richly God provides.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us about God's providence, and teaches us to exchange our sinful worry for patient trust. *"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (Mt. 6:31-33).

## III

This should have been clear to the crowd in the wilderness. They should have recognized that the One who so easily provided for their physical needs, could also—and most importantly—provide for their spiritual needs. They should have been most concerned to satisfy their spiritual hunger like they had been earlier that day. But the devil corrupted their thinking. They

began to suggest to one another that they should force Jesus to be their king, so that He could multiply bread for them all the time.

Jesus knew what was on their minds and insisted that the people return home. Now He did send them away, but it was for their own good. He came to do much more for them than provide earthly bread for temporary benefit. He came to give them heavenly Bread for eternal benefit.

The next day many came looking for Jesus, with the same misguided intention as the day before. Jesus addressed the issue immediately, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves"* (Jn. 6:26). In other words, He said they were motivated by fleshly and not godly thinking. Instead they should trust the One sent by God the Father (v. 29). They should listen to Jesus, *"the bread of life,"* who promised that *"whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst"* (v. 35).

Any other attempt to fill ourselves spiritually, whether by self-help methods, acts of service, or other good works, will always leave us feeling inadequate and guilty for not doing better. Nothing we do can fulfill our *"hunger and thirst for righteousness"* (Mt. 5:6). The only One who can satisfy our spiritual hunger is Jesus, and **Jesus Never Sends the Hungry Away Empty.**

*"I am the bread of life,"* He said. *"This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever"* (vv. 48,50-51). Jesus is not only talking about eating His body and drinking His blood in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, although that is one way He forgives our sins and strengthens our faith. But here, He is speaking more broadly about faith.

By faith in Jesus and His Word, we receive Him as our Savior and partake of His grace. He is the food our souls need when we are worn out or burdened, or when we feel the guilt of our unloving or anxious attitudes. Through His Word and Sacraments, Jesus comes to us in our weakness and fills us with His strength and righteousness. This heavenly nourishment keeps us from spiritual starvation in this life and gives us everything we need for life eternal.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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