

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 26, 2018

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 • Psalm 34:15-22 • Ephesians 6:10-20 • John 6:56-69

There are three events that show up in all four gospels. Three events that, despite their differences, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all agreed that you couldn't understand Jesus without knowing about. The first is the crucifixion. The second is the resurrection. And what's the third? It's not Christmas. It's not Jesus's baptism. It's not the Transfiguration or the Ascension or the Beatitudes. It's the feeding of the five thousand. If you want to understand Jesus, the gospel writers tell us, you need to understand the feeding of the five thousand.

And so for the past five weeks, we've been hearing bits and pieces of Jesus's long teaching about this miracle. How Jesus understands it. And to sum up the past five weeks, it's basically this. That in Jesus, God provides enough for everyone. In fact, God's giving of mercy and compassion and justice is so abundant that it could feed five thousand people. And this abundance, this being in relationship with God, is what St. John calls "eternal life."

And in today's gospel reading, John's attention turns away from Jesus to focus on the disciples. How do they respond to Jesus's explanation of the feeding of the five thousand? John says that when Jesus finished teaching, the disciples complained about it and said, "This teaching is difficult." And so "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

Now, we've been sitting through five weeks of these teachings. And so the question is out there for us as well. Have these teachings been difficult to listen to? Our answer to that is probably no. They've been rather easy to hear. No one came up to me or Carol Brighton and told us that the gospel readings were deeply offensive. No one has stormed out in the middle of the sermon. No one has lost their faith over them. In fact, if there is a problem with these readings it's that they're too easy to hear. The first week it's a nice change of pace. The third week it starts to feel a little repetitive. And by week five they start to feel a little bit boring.

But there's a big difference between finding something easy to hear and finding it easy to accept. It's easy to hear that God has provided enough for everyone. But it's hard to accept that teaching. It's difficult to actually live that way. Because accepting that teaching means learning to trust. And that's just about the hardest thing God asks of us. Because trusting means being vulnerable, opening ourselves up to being hurt or being wronged. It means learning to receive God's blessings instead of grasping for them every chance we get. And that trust in God's promises is just another word for faith.

Over the past couple of weeks, we've seen another example of what happens when we don't trust. Even more revelations of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Now, there's always a temptation for us to think that because this didn't happen in our denomination, this really isn't our problem. But even though we're not a Catholic parish, this still affects us directly. Part of that is because we are all one church. There's only one body of Christ. And where one part of that body suffers, we all suffer with it. And part of that is because the Catholic Church is so large that it sets the tone for the way we are perceived in the community, often for better but in this case for worse. To put it another way, the

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denominational structures we define ourselves by don't mean a whole lot in the eyes of God, and they mean even less in the eyes of our friends and neighbors.

And so it's worth pausing to consider why we call the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church a "scandal." It would not have been a scandal if a priest molested a child and was dealt with by law enforcement. It may not have even been a scandal if a whole bunch of priests abused kids and were prosecuted. It's a scandal because people in positions of power knew about the abuses that were going on. And they did nothing. And in some cases they even enabled the abuse.

And why didn't they do anything? Because they didn't trust that God has provided enough for everyone. Because those priests and bishops thought the most important thing was to get what they felt entitled to. The nice title, the respect of your community, the admiration of your peers. They didn't trust that God could provide for them outside of this bureaucracy they built, and so they never did anything. Because they didn't believe what Jesus said about himself. Or as St. John would say, "They found Jesus's teaching too hard to accept."

And the result isn't just about sexual misconduct by clergy. If they had been reported to law enforcement, it would have been misconduct. But it's bigger than that. It's a scandal. It's a crisis of trust. A lack of trust in God by people in positions of authority means that there's now a lack of trust in the church itself. A lack of trust that is entirely justified. And the problem with trust is that once you lose it, it never grows back quite as strong. You can contain incompetence. You can move on from honest mistakes. But once you lose people's trust, the whole culture of the institution starts to rot.

That's what's at the heart of the matter for our friends down the street right now. And it's at the heart of that matter for most of the social ills we face. Xenophobia. Sexism. Environmental degradation. Poverty. Nearly all of the social ills we live with aren't the result of ignorance or indifference or even malice. They're rooted in a lack of trust. Because we think that we can't live the lives we're called to live until we get what we believe we're entitled to. And so we hoard power, we stockpile resources, and we accumulate as much as we can to make us feel secure. And that grasping for security is never without its victims.

We actually have a day of the church year devoted to these victims. If you go to the front of the *ELW*, you can find the list of festivals and commemorations. We don't celebrate many of these, but we include them in the Eucharistic Prayer sometimes. But if you go down to December 28, you'll see it lists "The Holy Innocents, Martyrs." Who are the Holy Innocents? If you think back to the Christmas story from Matthew's gospel, there's a little scene where the magi go to King Herod and say they're looking for the King of the Jews who was just born. And when Herod hears about a new king, he thinks it must be a threat to his own claim on power. But Herod can't find this new king, so he decides to play it safe and kill every child under the age of two. And those infants who are massacred are called the Holy Innocents. So the Holy Innocents are the children who are seen as expendable because of adults' misguided desire for security. We don't know exactly how many Holy Innocents there are, but thanks to this scandal we can add another thousand to their ranks.

The calamitous effects of what happens when we don't trust are why the feeding of the five thousand is at the center of Jesus's ministry. That's why all four gospel writers said

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you couldn't understand Jesus without understanding this miracle. Not because the numbers were so impressive. But because in the feeding of the five thousand, we glimpse the abundance of ordinary graces that God intends for all of God's people. Of finding our true freedom and community by recognizing our dependence on God. Of people being invited to trust in God's provision instead of hoarding away whatever they can get.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all agreed that we needed to hear this story because too often our lives are stories about cycles of mistrust. Our choices are narrowed by skepticism and our freedom is constrained by cynicism. We lower our expectations until we forget they exist and whittle down our hopes until they don't feel like burdens. Our moral vision becomes so short-sighted that we find Jesus's promise of eternal life hard to accept.

They put this story right at the center of Jesus's life because they want it to be at the center of our lives, too. So that we trust that God can multiply our gifts and our faith and use them for the good of others. It transforms the way we live from the inside out, so that God's generosity becomes our way of life, too. And when that grace unfolds in our lives, it calls others out of their skepticism and mistrust and puts an end to the cycles of oppression we wind up.

And when that kind of grace embeds itself in our lives, the result is scandalous. Because it doesn't just stop with us. Other people get caught up in it, too. People like that crowd of five thousand who didn't know what they were hungry for. God transforms us so that instead of losing count of the Holy Innocents we leave in our wake, we would lose count of the people we feed with God's goodness.

That's the power that God gives every one of us, and that's why this story is at the center of who we are. Because the only thing stronger than fear is faith. The only thing more transformative than greed is justice. And the only thing more contagious than mistrust is hope.

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