

Sermon Lent 4 2020

March 22, 2020

John 6:1-15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

With everything going, it seemed appropriate read a letter Luther wrote to a man by the name of John Hess in 1527. You see in 1527 the Bubonic Plague struck Germany again. In view of that, there was an epidemic. In this epidemic, this pastor, John Hess had written Luther to know how to advise people in the midst of the turmoil. Luther's response bears a number of his signature marks when giving pastoral advice. I think the thing I like the best about it, though, is Luther's ability to balance between Divine Providence and human responsibility. In other words, his advice says not to tempt God, that is, don't intentionally expose yourself, or don't refrain from seeing a doctor with a sickness. In that same vein, don't put your neighbor at risk intentionally. But on the flip side, where you are needed to serve your neighbor, be there. And as he describes the outline for that, he looks—as he often does—to the Scriptural understanding of vocation. What are your vocations? Are they ones that allow you to flee to a place where you can be a hermit? Then that's OK! But do this in view of the commandments. And as I say that, you can think about that wording in the Small Catechism on Confession: are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, worker? If those demand that you stay to care for your neighbor, then don't flee. Be where you need to be. But if not it's Ok to go. To kind of summarize this there's a quote from this letter that you may have seen, is it's been floating around the internet these past couple of weeks.

Luther says: *"You ought to think this way: 'Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."*

Again, I think those are such great words of advice for our time. Having said that, another interesting thing in the letter was that Luther speaks also of encouraging people to go to church. I don't know how he would respond in our day where we can distribute church in the way that we are doing right now, but I suppose it's all the more an encouragement that when we are able to be with one another face to face we ought to be. And if somehow this gets to someone who doesn't not have a church home, I encourage you to find that face to face connection in a church as well. Those of you who read my email read my words making the point that as Jesus came in the flesh, so also the Church, when she is able, gathers in the flesh. She gathers around the Living Word of Jesus and around His body and blood in the Supper.

In the meantime, however, one last point that Luther made is very fitting for our lessons this morning. He said that in the midst of an epidemic—or a pandemic in our case: *“we can be sure that God’s punishment has come upon us, not only to chastise us for our sins but also to test our faith and love—our faith in that we may see and experience how we should act toward God; our love in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor.”* Something such as this comes that we may see and experience how we should act toward God and that would recognize how we should act toward our neighbor.

I make this connection because in the Gospel lesson and you could see also in the Old Testament lesson that there is this test in particular with regard to faith. In the Old Testament, the Israelites are out in the wilderness. As I say that I always like to give it the context that they are there after they have been freed in the Exodus. They had been in slavery in Egypt to Pharaoh. They had been rescued from that slavery by Moses. They had been led through the Red Sea and now they're in the wilderness. And in that they're being tested. How will they respond to God? And as they so often do, they grumble.

Here God has taken them from the burdens of their taskmasters, out from under the whips of their slave-drivers, and what do they say? “Why did you do this, Moses? Why did you bring us out to let us die?” And of course, God knew what He was doing. He wasn't going to let them die. He wasn't going to free them that they would then be abandoned by Him. No! These are His precious people! He's not going to leave them.

The same is true for us, Christians. God has rescued us from the tyranny of sin, death, and the devil. He's not going to let us wither and fall. He's not going to leave us alone. All the more as we experience this trial that we're enduring now with COVID-19. Now, I'm sure that some of you are more anxious than others, but no matter how worried you are, you can sense the overall tension around us. And in that, we have this comfort. The God who has rescued us from sin, will not abandon us now.

To connect this then to the Gospel Lesson, we see this test that Jesus gives Philipp. If you recall in the lesson, Jesus turned to Philipp and He said, **"Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?"** And why? **"He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do."** Jesus knew He had all these people there. He knew just how they were going to be fed, but Philipp didn't. So, He tested him. How would Philipp experience how he should act toward God? Would Philipp trust Jesus in this seemingly overwhelming circumstance?

Well, then Jesus shows him. He takes the bread, He gives thanks, He breaks it and gives it to the people. And they eat. Not only do they eat, but look at what John tells us that they ate **"as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, [Jesus] 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."** How much did they eat? They ate until they had their fill. They had plenty. In fact, not only did Jesus give them plenty, but an abundance overflowed from it.

Now, there are two things to consider from this. First, as we watch people running to the grocery stores in fear that there won't be enough, this is a great reminder. Not only did we have our public officials saying over and over not to worry about this because all of the supply chains will remain intact, but we have the promise of our Lord that there's not need for us to run to the store and hoard right now. No, we have this assurance that we will be taken care of.

And second, look at the number of basketsful that are left. Did you hear the number? There are twelve. In the Bible, the number twelve signifies the Church. There were twelve tribes in the Old Testament. There were twelve disciples in the New Testament. This is the Church. And what do we see? The Church will be filled. There's not need for us to worry in the midst of this. There's not need for us wring our hands and fear that God will not provide. May there be times we don't get what

we want exactly as we want it? Certainly. Consider that even the Israelites got tired of the Manna.

I always think about that. Here this was the miraculous provision from God, and they grumble about it. But that's how we are, isn't it? God abundantly and mercifully gives to us. He graciously gives and gives and gives and we worry it's not enough. Or we decide it's not enough. Or it's not what we want. But it is best. It might not be what we want, but it's best. And we see this because we see His goodness.

I think I've mentioned this before, but we see at the end of the Gospel of John that he tells us this Gospel is written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing we might have life in His Name. In particular, you have John writing about these signs that Jesus did. The signs in John are a big deal. And you saw it in this lesson. **“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’”** When they saw what? The sign! That's how they knew. The sign of this care is how we know ourselves.

And what sign in particular? The sign of Jesus' death on the cross. The sign that the sins that we commit, our sins of grumbling, our sins of worrying, our sins of doubting God and selfishness toward our neighbor, all of that is crucified on that cross of Jesus, and in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we have the sign that shows us our sin has been declared forgiven. As we see all of that, then, we see who our God is. We His love for us. We see that as we experience the trials that we have now, that He is loving and He will never forsake us. He will never leave us. He will make sure that we have the food that we need, and all the more the eternal care that is necessary.

Christians, as we hear Luther describing the testing of an epidemic as something God gives us *“that we may see and experience how we should act toward God... [and] that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor,”* our Lord Jesus' action in this lesson makes it clear. The sign of His giving bread to the Five Thousand shows His desire to care even for our bodily needs. The sign of His death and resurrection for our sin shows His goodness and desire to love us not only now, but eternally. All of this then gives us the comfort that no matter what happens now, no matter the trials we experience, no matter sickness or hunger, our God will care for us and is trustworthy in His Love for us. May God comfort us with His peace, then in that love as we continue in the days ahead. Amen.