

## **“Feeding the Sheep”**

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**St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky**

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Once again, we meet Jesus in a desert place, in the wilderness far from home. In the midst of experiences of grief and rejection, Jesus leaves by boat to a deserted place. Jesus retreats, away from the crowds and the demands, to mourn the death of John the Baptist, another prophet murdered by those in power. Jesus goes away from his hometown, where he had been met with skepticism that the son of a carpenter, a commoner with no particular status or education, might have something to say that was worth listening to. Grieved, exhausted, perhaps even a little afraid of suffering the same fate as his controversial cousin, Jesus goes away to be alone, for rest and for prayer. But the pull of his holiness, the deep thirst for his words and the hope in his healing hands brings the crowds to their feet. A place that Jesus reaches by boat, the crowds follow on foot, walking for miles without food or shelter or a guarantee of finding him. Like the first disciples who dropped their nets and their entire lives to follow the call of Jesus, the multitudes dropped everything to seek the Son of God in the desert, with nothing but the clothes on their backs and a fire newly kindled in their hearts.

We are among the crowds, hungry for bread and for a good word from the mouth of Jesus. But we are also afforded the vantage point of the disciples, coming close to Jesus in hopes of some plan of action, some way forward. With the disciples, we look out at the crowd, thousands and thousands of people hungry and helpless and brimming with unmet need. Like the disciples, we are overwhelmed by our own powerlessness, by the magnitude of the need and the meagerness of our inner resources. Send them away, we say, send them to fend for themselves,

there are too many of them and they are far from home. The disciples know that the crowds will listen to Jesus, if he tells them to go and feed themselves they will do so. Like the disciples, we know that the hour is late and the world is hungry, and there is plenty of food elsewhere, plenty of wealth and work to be had someplace else, it's out of our hands.

But unlike our limited and easily overwhelmed imaginations, the creative power of God knows no bounds. Jesus looks at his disciples and says "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Jesus looks into the faces of his disciples whom he has called to a ministry beyond their wildest imaginings, and tells them what he will again tell them from the other side of death; feed my sheep. When the disciples look at their meager rations, barely enough to feed themselves, they again feel overwhelmed, discouraged, insufficient. The familiar sensation in the gut, as we look out over the never-ending need of the poor and oppressed and hungry of the world, hits as we stare down into a basket of five small loaves of bread and two fish, knowing that the nearest market is miles away and the common purse is feeling awfully light lately. But Jesus said to feed the people, and so we bring what we have and lay it at his feet. In the same small basket where the disciples see scarcity, Jesus sees the fruit of the earth; wheat grown and processed and kneaded into bread by human hands. The bounty of the sea, fish caught in hand-mended nets by families just like those his disciples came from. Jesus sees a meal that encompasses God's creation and human creativity, the gifts of labor and agriculture and skill. Looking up to heaven, Jesus blesses what has been provided, praising God for its existence and trusting that God's goodness will continue to provide for God's people in their need. In this moment Jesus models to us the trust we affirm in God's providence every time we pray "give us this day our daily bread." The abundance of God is not limited by our imaginations or even by

what we bring to the table. If we bring all that we have into the hands of Christ, what is handed back to us will be food enough to feed a multitude, faith enough to accomplish miracles.

That is the piece of this story that we often miss, when we say that Jesus fed the five thousand. Jesus does not feed the five thousand, or even take the credit for doing so. The Disciples gave the food to Jesus, and then after it had received his blessing the DISCIPLES gave the food to the crowds. God's miraculous abundance made it possible, but the disciples were the hands that fed the hungry crowd in a deserted place. Jesus does not cause manna to fall from heaven, or bring forth water from a rock, or turn stones into bread. He accepts the modest offerings of his disciples, and empowers them to feed the world. Notice that the disciples say, "we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish" and still they bring all of it to Jesus. The disciples do not first feed themselves and then present an empty basket to Jesus to be filled. Nothing is held back, everything they have is brought to Jesus, even as they acknowledge that it cannot possibly be enough. The disciples rely on Jesus to feed them too, and he does. In feeding the hungry on God's behalf, the disciples are filled, and are even left with an abundance to carry with them on their way.

Not for the first time, or the last, in empty and deserted places, Jesus equips those he calls to serve his people, blessing what they already have, knowing that what they have is God-given and still so very human. Our meager offerings are in the basket, the fruits of our lives and our labor and our belovedness and our insufficiency. When we are being starved, when we are in the desert, cut off from community and fellowship and even our daily bread, even then, God is ready to make an abundant feast of what we do have, of what we have been given and of what we choose to give back. In this drought, in this time of separation and spiritual hunger and thirst for connection, we might feel often like the hungry multitude, who followed on foot the God who

promises healing and wholeness for our weary souls. At times that is just what we need, to sit down on the grass and be fed by our Lord's goodness and mercy. But remember that even in the desert we are disciples, called and chosen for a purpose and for the mission of a kingdom we pray every day might come. We are called to come to the feet of Jesus, on behalf of the great and hungering crowd, and offer all that we have to be blessed by him. We are called to be broken and given to his people as an offering and a miracle, as the image of fullness and hospitality and joy that has been offered to us in our baptism. We are the hands that receive the bread, not simply to feed ourselves, but to feed the world in the name of the God who gave himself for us and for them, for all of creation. Even when we feel that we have nothing, that we have been given nothing and even when we feel abandoned as our Lord was abandoned by his friends- even then, there is something in us which calls us back to offer even our emptiness to Jesus, that we might be filled. Look down, look around, look within. Jesus has told you to give this hungry world something to eat. Jesus has commanded you to feed his sheep. Bring what you have to the feet of our Savior, and watch what miracles our God can make of you.