

Sermon for Grace Lutheran Church (August 1-2, 2026)
10th Sunday after Pentecost — — Matthew 14:13-21
The Rev. Nancy R. Easton

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When our church's Community Meal resumed three years ago, I volunteered to help. Not that I know anything about preparing an entree to feed 50, but I'm a willing worker—I'll start the coffee, set out cold drinks, plate up desserts, serve soup, and generally do whatever I'm asked. I enjoy the fellowship in the kitchen, as well as in the social hall, and find this experience deeply satisfying.

I was discussing the meal with a friend from outside our congregation. She asked, "Is the meal free?" I said, "Yes, it's free." She asked, "Do you need to be a member of Grace?" I said, "No, anyone is welcome." She didn't ask anything else, but I suppose a person might ask: "Do I need to sign up for the meal ahead of time?" (I'd answer, "No sign-ups—just come!") And finally, "What if I want seconds? Or want to take some extras home for tomorrow's lunch or for my neighbor?" (And I'd say, "Once everyone has been through the line and gotten a meal, we're happy to offer seconds or some leftovers in take-out containers. We try to have extra food on hand.")

It's no wonder then that today's Gospel story of the feeding of the 5,000 makes me think about our Community Meal. Look, the meal came without cost. Everyone was welcome. No-one signed up ahead of time. And there were plenty of leftovers.

The story of Jesus providing a meal for more than 5,000 people with only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish may be familiar to you. It should be, because a version of it is found in each of our four Gospels of the Bible, and it's a part of our Sunday lesson cycle every year. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all describe a meal at Jesus' hands

that feeds thousands. (In fact, Matthew and Mark tell it twice—with differing crowd numbers and amounts of food.) I guess the event was such a powerful moment in Jesus' ministry that all 4 Gospel writers would describe it, even more than once.

When I was a child I was hooked by the **miracle**—that a small amount of food blessed by Jesus could feed a multitude. But over the years, I'm less hooked by the miracle, and more taken by the picture the story paints of what the Kingdom of God looks like. I think this banquet tells us quite a lot about the world Jesus Christ invites us into, and our role in that world.

But we may not fully recognize Christ's Kingdom here, or understand our place in it, unless we first consider another banquet. I'm talking about another special feast that occurs in Matthew (as well as Mark) just prior to our lesson today. Did you notice how our lesson opened up? "Now when Jesus heard this..."

Okay, WHAT did Jesus hear? We might have no clue. For each Sunday we read only a small chunk of biblical material, and we may not think it's connected to, or has any meaning derived from what happened before it. But clearly, Matthew **wants** us to notice something. Matthew says Jesus heard something, learned something. And then he went and did something.

So what DID Jesus hear? He learned the fate of his kinsman, the prophet John the Baptist, at another banquet. Our lesson today begins at vs. 13. But if you begin at vs. 1, you'll learn what Jesus learned. Let me give you the gist of what he heard. Now John the Baptist had not only foretold Jesus' coming into the world, but also strove to prepare God's people for his coming by calling out sin and by calling for repentance. It landed him in prison, because he happened to call out sin committed by King Herod

himself. Herod had taken his niece, Herodias (who was the wife of his half-brother Philip), to be his own, and John the Baptist denounces that. Herod imprisons him to shut him up. And then on Herod's birthday, a big party was held. A whole company of people came to celebrate, and Herodias' daughter dances for the guests. Herod is so pleased with the way she is received that he makes a ridiculous promise to do anything she asks. Her mother suggests she ask for John the Baptist's head to be served on a platter. Herod gulps, but he's made a promise. The guests knew it. He would be shame-faced if he didn't follow through on his oath. So the terrible execution was done, and the head displayed on the platter at the birthday party. Later, John the Baptist's followers claimed the body for burial, and informed Jesus.

These are two very different banquets, side-by-side, and Matthew wants us to see that contrast. First, you have Herod's party: Anybody who was anybody was invited—and the rest can only wish they had received an invitation. It was a big to-do. The rich, the powerful, the people who supported Herod in his rule were invited. Of course, being invited meant they would also now owe Herod something in the future. A lot of quid pro quo went on in these kinds of events. So the banquet was not really free in that sense, and not everyone was welcome. And even though the food served was glorious—ewers of the best wine, exotic fruits and roasted meats piled high—well, you might not have much of an appetite left once you saw a serving platter with a head on it. Herod himself was not free to enjoy this banquet—he was having to fulfill a foolish promise and save face in the presence of all his guests. Happy birthday, Herod! And that's what Jesus learns.

Now you have **Jesus'** party: 5,000 people plus. Maybe some “important” folks among the crowds, but who they were wasn't important. Any “important” folks and a lot of nobodies were there because they were hungry for Jesus—for his teachings to guide them, for his touch to heal them, for something about him they couldn't even quite explain—and they were willing to go wherever he was, just to be near him. They may or may not have had some coins in their bag to purchase food at a local market. But they didn't want to leave him, and remained there to hang on his every word. So Jesus fed them all. Because they were all important to him. He told his disciples the crowds didn't need to go away—that they should give them something to eat. And then Jesus provided that something.

The meal was free. Anybody could have it. Jesus made it happen right then and there. And there were leftovers. **Life** served on a platter for all. People deeply satisfied in all their hungers. The bread and fish substantial and nourishing. Jesus' presence warm and reassuring. A community created where connection and generosity and compassion abound. A place where every single person belongs and is loved. This is a glimpse of the Kingdom of God that Jesus ushers in for us, and, as well, a glimpse of what our role in that Kingdom can be.

All too often, the way the world seems to be is a lot like Herod's birthday banquet. People jostle for status to get ahead. Quid pro quo is the order of the day. There is no free lunch. And if you're not careful, your head might end up on the chopping block.

But I think we forget about that other banquet, that glimpse of the Kingdom we've been given more than once in the Bible. We forget about it, and we make our life

in Christ so complicated. We worry if we're doing it right—this trying to follow Jesus—for we know full well we falter every day. The daily news leaves us overwhelmed by the world's needs, thinking what we have to offer is so little, and never enough. We each have our own private concerns, and we're more apt to turn inward than outward toward others. We may feel incredibly alone in this life, even in a crowd.

But take time today to remember that banquet on the expanse of grass, and know that, even if only a glimpse of God's Kingdom, that glimpse is still a present reality. Hold onto it, and learn from it. Matthew wants you to do that. Jesus wants you to do that.

Many of us had quite a time of it a few weeks back, with the bad storms, and the damage, and the extended power outages. Just after the July 4th storm rolled through, and the power went out in my neighborhood, a number of us came outside to survey the scene. Our neighbor catty-corner to us (who happened to be away on vacation for a week) had extensive tree damage (though fortunately not to their home). The branches from their trees were strewn across the street, and all the neighbors began methodically picking up or dragging what they could off the street and sidewalks to permit access and, I guess you'd say, just to "tidy up" as best we could what was a big mess for our neighbor. Another neighbor was able to take photos of the damage and contact the homeowner to keep them informed, helping them contact a tree service to saw and cut and cart away the debris. Another neighbor who was caring for their pet entered the house later that week and disposed of food that was beginning to spoil in the outage. These weren't grandiose things, but we did them for our neighbor. I suspect you had the same kinds of things going on in your neighborhoods.

Two weeks later, the homeowner went door to door, and gave us each a loaf of fresh-baked zucchini bread. (I wouldn't term it a miracle like the loaves and the fishes, knowing how prolific zucchini can be in a garden, but then again, maybe it was a little miracle. They must have baked a lot of bread.) The homeowner expressed thankfulness to each of us for the things we'd done while they were away. They were overwhelmed by our simple actions. And we, on our part, enjoyed a simple, delicious zucchini bread.

It seems to me that when we think of the banquet on that expanse of grass, Jesus' compassion and love for the crowds, his encouraging his disciples to act with the little bit they had, and the deep satisfaction experienced by everyone there—well, then, maybe we'll decide to join that crowd. We'll hunger to spend time with Jesus, and listen to him. We'll accept his forgiveness and live into it. We'll turn outward beyond ourselves and we'll truly see the faces of the people we meet, consider them our neighbors, and seek to do good for them. These are daily behaviors that become habitual in our time spent with our Lord. We may not change the world, but in our own little corner of it, Christ will once again be shaping a beloved community, miracles will happen, and you and I will be blessed to be part of it. **AMEN.**