

## Sermon ✝ August 1, 2021

John 6:24-35

Frank Maxwell

I was ordained at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Soderville, Minnesota on June 1, 1975. The very next day, Mary and I drove to Oulu, Wisconsin (located in Bayfield County . . . north of US-2 . . . in between Ashland and Superior). I was to begin my ministry as the pastor of Hope Lutheran Church in Oulu and First Lutheran Church in Port Wing, Wisconsin.

Port Wing is on the South Shore of Lake Superior and most of the members of First Lutheran claimed a Swedish ancestry. Swedish Lutherans were people I knew and understood as Our Savior's, the church where I was ordained, was also a Swedish Lutheran congregation. But Oulu, Oulu was an entirely different brand of Lutherans. These were Finnish Lutherans. I knew nothing about Finns.

Maxwell is a Scottish surname. My mother was a McNeil—Irish. And from what I can tell, my ancestors, have pretty much married within their own clans for generations. I know about the Scots and the Irish. And growing up in an immigrant Italian neighborhood, I know about the Italians.

But Finnish . . . well I knew nothing about the people or the culture. And Hope Lutheran was a truly Finnish congregation. I was only the third non-Finnish speaking pastor to serve this congregation. Ten years prior to my installation as their pastor, all of the council minutes as well as all of the church records were kept in Finnish. The parsonage was located directly next door to the church and conveniently located in the back yard was an authentic Finnish sauna.

So it was that Mary and I began our love affair with the good people of Oulu. Actually, the correct Finnish pronunciation is Ö-loo.

The people who lived in Oulu were all direct descendants of the early Finnish settlers who came to this country to work in the copper mines in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and the Minnesota Iron Range. And most of them still spoke with a very thick Finnish accent.

One of the first things I noticed about the Oulu Finns is that they were not outwardly emotional. And many of them spoke with a very matter-of-fact, flat, monotone voice.

It is no secret that Scandinavians are not known for extravagant displays of emotions, but the Finns make the rest of the Scandinavians look like New Year's Eve revelers in Times Square.

However, as a pastor, I have never been treated with more love and respect than I received from these folks. They were extremely loyal to their church. And they had such wonderful names: Oiva Kangas, Reino Makela, Impi Yrianainen, Toivo Pykkola.

For nearly the entirety of its existence, Finland as a country, was under the rule of neighboring nations. It was somewhere around 1155 that Finland became a province of Sweden and remained so until the "Finnish War" of 1809 when it became the Grand Duchy of Russia. Then in 1917, the Finns declared their independence.

Over the years, the Finns learned not to expect too much from life . . . they were ruled by outsiders, there were wars and plagues and famine and the Finnish landscape was cold and harsh. So they played whatever hand they were dealt.

As I reflect on those early years of ministry with the people of Hope Lutheran Church in Oulu, I also remember something incredible. They never complained . . . they never whined . . . they were always grateful . . . for whatever. I would like to say that's how it's been in every parish since . . . but there have been some folks . . .

That brings to two of the lessons for this day: Exodus and John.

We look first at Exodus. The Israelites were enslaved for generations. At great personal risk, Moses freed his people amid plagues and deceptions. The climax of the Exodus is the dramatic parting of the Red Sea.

In today's lesson; it is about two weeks since the Red Sea event. Provisions are low. And instead of praying . . . they begin to complain (mutter). Within a two week span, they had forgotten all that God through Moses had done for them.

And then there's the Gospel of John. It is a similar story but with a different kind of twist. After feeding the 5,000, Jesus and his disciples left the crowd and sailed across the Sea of Galilee. The next morning when the crowd realized that Jesus had left, they went in search for him. Jesus perceived what they were seeking. He had provided them with such a good supper that they now wanted him to serve them breakfast. They were looking for food, food that once eaten would satisfy only briefly.

So it is that these two lessons present us with a sad commentary on the human condition. The Israelites, forgetting all that they had been through, were quick to complain to God about their low provisions. And the 5,000 who had been fed by Jesus, when they realized he was their meal ticket, they thought, "why not get the most out of a good thing."

Both situations produce a most surprising turn-of-events . . . God's abundant grace. God is magnificently lenient. In both instances, God would have been well within rights to place each individual over a knee and give them a good spanking. What happens, however, is most surprising. God does not allow the people to go hungry.

In the case of the Israelites; God provided immediate nourishment. Quails for meat in the evening and manna in the morning. *And* they could "eat to their heart's content."

And in the case of today's Gospel from John, Jesus tells the people that what they need is not simply physical food but spiritual food as well. Jesus later said that he was who and what they needed. He was both the gift and the giver. But they didn't understand.

The message for us is clear. We need to be more satisfied with our situation. We may not even want to think about how often we sound like the Israelites. All of us probably suffer different degrees of not counting our blessings . . . only looking to what we don't have. And sure, for most of us things could be better, but I imagine they could be a whole lot worse as well.

We need to understand that God's grace is also a judgement. God sets before all of us what we might call "Exodus opportunities" The Israelites were given food to eat. It was up to them to make the best of their situation. They could either seize the opportunity and be grateful or continue their muttering.

It is up to us to utilize the many gifts that God has given to us. We are to use our gifts is to participate in our own "Exodus opportunities." God does take care of God's people. This has been demonstrated to us time and time again. But God takes care of us as God sees fit.

The crowd that followed Jesus around the Sea of Galilee wanted another simple meal. Jesus said; *"Sure, I'll feed you, but with food that really counts."* What happens . . . is a miracle. *But . . .* the miracle goes way beyond the fact that some people were fed. Given their attitudes, it is a miracle that God even fed them at all. The real miracle was and is God's grace. (God's undeserved love freely given).

And God loves us so much that God continues to feed us. As we gather around this altar, we participate in the greatest meal of all. Today we are, once again, receiving the bread of life. No one who comes to this altar shall ever be hungry. No one who believes, shall ever thirst.

As we share in this miracle of grace, may we see beyond our own selfish wants. May we try to better understand God's purpose for our lives. May we say, "thank you" and really mean it.

Thanks be to our heavenly God who provides the true bread from heaven. Amen .