

June 3, 2018
"Summer Fun: Picnic"
Matthew 14: 15-21

All Bible quotations are from the *Common English Bible*.

When I say, "Picnic," what do you think of?

I have lots of memories of picnics. There were Smick family reunions at Uncle Zan's pig farm—all day celebrations that included the longest picnic buffet that I can recall. Sometimes just my closer Smick relatives got together in Quincy. These were wonderful times of catching up and seeing how the cousins had grown. There were picnics in the front yard of my home, when my mother would make popcorn for every kid who showed up and we would eat it under the shade of the maple trees in the front yard. At my Grandma and Grandpa Degitz's house, Grandma would often serve lunch from the picnic table on the patio, turning a ordinary meal of sloppy joes and German potato salad into an occasion. There were also picnics with our Keokuk friends, often held with a view of the Mississippi River. The adults would sit in lawn chairs while us kids would play games in the grass and catch fireflies as evening came. These are some of the happiest and most warmly remembered moments from my life, when life's finest pleasures of family, friends and food were present in abundance.

Jesus and the disciples also celebrated these things with a picnic. Hear these words from Matthew 14: 15-21:

That evening his disciples came and said to him, "This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

But Jesus said to them, "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat."

They replied, "We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish."

He said, "Bring them here to me." He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.

I think, as we hear this story, we are meant to recall another Biblical picnic. In the book of Exodus, we are told the story of Moses and the Israelites, and there are some interesting parallels to Jesus and the feeding of the 5000. Moses and his people set out into the wilderness.

Jesus, the disciples and the crowd were also in a wilderness, an “isolated place” far from any village. “Wilderness” is symbolic. It’s a place that was treacherous for our ancestors. Far from supplies and protection, it represented danger and risk.

And it wasn’t long before fear overcame those fleeing Egypt. They doubted God’s provision for them, and began complaining to Moses about how they had been brought to the wilderness to starve. Not that different from the disciples, who feared they couldn’t feed the crowd, and complained about their own meager supplies.

But a miracle happened in both cases. God supplied the Israelites with manna, bread from heaven that nourished them reliably for their journey. And Jesus supplied the disciples and the crowd, multiplying the little they had into an abundance that fed them well.

But there is more to this story. We are also meant to recall another meal, held in an upper room. Listen for the similarities in Matthew 26: 20, 26-28:

That evening he took his place at the table with the twelve disciples.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take and eat. This is my body.” He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many so that their sins may be forgiven.

Both stories happen in the evening. In the upper room, Jesus “took his place.” This is the same Greek word translated in Matthew 14 as “sit down.” In both narratives Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. And then all eat.

But there is more. This story reminds me of John 21: 9-12a. This is where Peter and some of the other disciples try to work through their confusion about Jesus’ death and resurrection by fishing through the night. They catch nothing. As morning nears, an unknown man calls to them from the beach, urging them to cast their net from the right side of the boat. They do so, and haul in an abundance. Meanwhile, Jesus prepares breakfast for them of...bread and fish:

When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you’ve just caught.” Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn’t torn, even with so many fish. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.”

But I think there is even more to this story of grace, providence and abundance. Perhaps we are also to see in it a preview of the Kingdom of God.

The meal the disciples served to the crowd was not just any meal, but something special. Bread was very important to the people of 1st century Palestine. Most people were poor, and bread

was easy to come by. It made up about 50% of their daily caloric intake. Think about that for a minute. Bread is something we put a sandwich in or eat on the side, but for our ancestors, it was the biggest part of every meal.

The Greek word here for bread, *artos*, isn't specific. It also means food in general, necessary to daily sustenance. This is the very stuff of life that Jesus offers—the bread of life. As Jesus says in John 6: 32-35:

Jesus told them, "I assure you, it wasn't Moses who gave the bread from heaven to you, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

They said, "Sir, give us this bread all the time!"

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

And let's talk about the fish. To our Biblical ancestors, fish was highly desirable but difficult to obtain. Most people ate it only for Sabbath. *So Jesus and the disciples were serving a Sabbath meal!* For a moment, on that hillside in Galilee, the Kingdom of God was among them. All were feasting at a table set by God in peace and abundance. That is the reality of God's Kingdom.

Another theme that comes to us in this story is the idea of "enough." Jesus took what the disciples had, multiplied it by his grace, and made it enough for the whole crowd.

I think many people often worry about being "enough." We can drive ourselves crazy trying to do *more* and be *more*. I find myself in this position when preparing for guests in my home. I think I'm going to pick up the clutter in the kitchen, and before I know it I'm scrubbing the sink drain with a toothbrush, practically in a panic that I'll be shamed by the state of my housekeeping.

I also do this in ministry. It's so easy to second guess myself. Did I cover everything? did I talk to the right people? Did I let a ball drop? Did I use the right words? Was I creative? Compassionate? Could I have made that more meaningful?

When is enough, *enough*? How good/right/busy/perfect do we have to be in order to justify ourselves?

The answer, of course, is that we don't justify ourselves. We can never justify ourselves. It's God who does that, and he does so with mercy and compassion. We don't have to do everything we can think of to be loved and valued, or to fix everything that is broken to be a part of God's saving grace. We don't have to be the answer to every question and the response to every need, because God's Spirit is working in, through and among us. God is the answer,

and God is the response, we just have to open ourselves to doing what we can to participate with him. God is enough. We don't have to be.

I'm reminded of this when I've worked at the soup kitchen. The need is so great. Hungry people come pouring in, and they are filled with needs and brokenness, like we are. It would be easy to get overwhelmed and panic about not being enough. But by the miracle of God's grace, we *are* enough. Everyone gets fed—all they can eat. And for the moment the Kingdom of God reigns. For the time we are there, God makes us enough, and it is good!

Which brings us to trust. Jesus said in our scripture, "*You* give them something to eat."

The disciples must have thought he was crazy. "We have nothing but five loaves and two fish!" they replied. How were they supposed to give the people something to eat with these meager resources?

Jesus said, "Bring them here to me." And everything was changed.

How often do we respond to Jesus' call like this? We agonize about a need or a problem, and Jesus says, "*You* do it."

We reply, "But I can't! I don't have what it takes. I don't have the skills, the talent, the gifts. I'm too humble, too meek, too weak."

And Jesus says, "Bring your skills, talent, gifts, humility, meekness and weakness to me, and I will multiply it, making it into everything you need." Can we trust him to do that?

Can we trust that we can come—warts, sin and all—to Jesus' table and receive a welcome?

Can we trust that through Christ, we are enough?

Can we trust that God is going to provide the sustenance we need?

Can we trust that God will uphold and work through us?

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