

7 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 13 – Year A – July 31, 2011
Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17: 1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21
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Twentieth century American writer, Eric Hoffer, wrote, “The chemistry of dissatisfaction is as the chemistry of some marvelously potent tar. In it are the building stones of explosives, stimulants, poisons, opiates, perfumes and stench.” One more time, “The chemistry of dissatisfaction is as the chemistry of some marvelously potent tar. In it are the building stones of explosives, stimulants, poisons, opiates, perfumes and stench.” This week it’s worth our time to consider our own dissatisfaction, its source, its motives, and what God may be trying to tell us through it. We may discover God is preparing us for an important step in our spiritual growth. If we’re given a choice, most of us will stay in our comfort zones, keep the status quo, and resist change. The good news is that God doesn’t settle for the status quo. There is the irresistible push and pull of the Holy Spirit transforming us into Christ-likeness, and leading us into deeper relationships.

The Gospel story today is so rich and full of possibilities that we have little choice but to touch on some of the most well known themes, before we focus on its hidden depths. There’s plenty to stimulate our imagination even within the better-rehearsed themes. They are still marvelously potent, and God is always inviting us to hear them anew. As Jesus would say, “Let anyone with ears, listen!” The explosive prelude to Jesus going away to a deserted place by himself is the fact that John the Baptist has just been beheaded at King Herod’s order. John’s head is presented at Herod’s macabre banquet of violence like a grisly party favor, served bloody and still lukewarm on a platter. Jesus’ incredible compassion for the crowd that follows him into the desert is the antithesis of Herod’s banquet. There’s no pre-determined guest list of the powerful and influential, and there’s no violence. There is God’s generous and abundant provision for the poor and hungry. Also, quite contrary to the prevailing system of patronage in the Roman ruled culture of the day, there’s no expectation of reciprocity either. The meal is pure grace, pure gift. It’s provided as proof of God’s kingdom in action: compassion, healing, and our daily bread. It is the liberating and free gift of life. That’s a clear alternative to the idolatrous kingdom established by the Roman Emperor, who also claims to be god and a provider for his people. Anyone on that grassy hillside could tell you, Rome’s idea of kingdom is thoroughly corrupt. Just this aspect of the reading raises multiple possibilities for you and me today. It’s a good thing to examine our own dependence on God alone as the source of our daily bread. It’s a good thing to question how much of our security rests in our independent ways, or in our bank and investment accounts, as opposed to God’s gracious provision. It’s good to question how we contribute to injustice and inequality in the world’s power structures through our own desire to have more, bigger, better, or the latest model.

As we heard last week, the symbolic reality of Jesus as bread for the life of the world is also present in this story of the feeding of the five thousand, plus women and children. The Judeans would immediately associate the deserted place with the wilderness experience of the Exodus journey. The forty years of wandering in the desert was a profound lesson in reliance on God. It was also an important time of healing and repentance, preparing the Israelites for life in the Promised Land. Weaning the sin-sick and dependent Israelites off the opiate of Egypt’s riches, which of course came at the terrible price of bondage, took time. Like being in recovery from any addictive pattern of behavior, it’s hard work and easy to fall back into old habits. Learning to appreciate the sweet perfume of God’s freedom took years of adjustment. As we know, the Israelites were constantly dissatisfied, and craved their former life, despite the brutality and high cost of slavery. Again, you and I have much to learn from this old-new theme. How willing are we to dramatically change our own lives to follow Jesus into the wilderness. Do we really trust God’s promise of freedom? Will we make the necessary personal sacrifices to expand God’s kingdom, so that we can reach more of our neighbors for Christ? Are we dissatisfied enough with the status quo to enter into a period of discomforting

change? Are we all willing to live with the unpleasant stench of upheaval in order to significantly grow God's kingdom, and feed others as we have been fed?

As the story says, Jesus takes what the disciples offer Him, blesses the gift, breaks the bread, gives it back to them, and tells them to feed the people. Jesus' prayer is important. He looks up to heaven in a physical statement of faith, humility, and utter dependence on God. He blesses the meal as an expression of praise and thanksgiving to God. And He shares the meal, proving God's abundance and grace, even in the face of our cynical denial, and fear of scarcity. In other words, Jesus feeds us, so that we can feed others with the bread of life. The miraculous abundance refutes our compulsive urge to hoard, and to take more than we need, because we fear that there's not enough. What is the stabbing dissatisfaction that drives us to fearful behavior, rather than to trust in God's steadfast love and faithfulness?

There's no doubt that Jesus is always found in solidarity with the poor and hungry, filled with compassion that stimulates Him to action. As the face of Christ to the world, as Jesus' hands and feet in the world, our divinely-inspired compassion means that we're also willing to share God's love in word and deed, reaching out to those in need, and caring for those who have nothing. We are blessed to be co-creators with God, agents of growth in God's kingdom. God feeds us in many ways, and especially in prayer, the study of God's word, and in the Eucharistic feast. Matthew's community was grounded in the sharing of Holy Communion, and this story of Jesus' miraculous feeding of a multitude foreshadows that as much as it looks forward to the heavenly banquet. We might each consider how we, in turn, bless and feed others. Or how our words and deeds add to the poisonous sludge of life in a secular world. As one commentator puts it, "atheistic materialism and vacuous consumerism both deny the claim of God's word" on our hearts and our lives.

There's certainly more to say, but we must also consider how God has moved us to this point in time. We've read about God's abundant love, and how God is hidden in plain sight. We've heard stories of God's kingdom, and why we want to be a part of it. We've listened as Jesus encourages us to be attentive to the Word, yet speaks in parables so we have to think for ourselves. In today's lesson, the disciples move from being overwhelmed by the need around them, to reassurance of God's provision. They claim, "we have nothing here but five loaves and two fishes". Yet the small amount we do have, when offered to God becomes miraculously multiplied. Isn't it true that much of our personal dissatisfaction is rooted in thinking we have nothing, when the truth is that we have so much, and so many gifts to offer to God? The crowd is in a deserted place with rumbling bellies, before finding themselves acutely present to the presence of God in Christ Jesus. "And all ate and were filled." Perhaps this is the hidden treasure of this reading. Perhaps this is what we desire the most. God in Christ Jesus is the only One who can truly satisfy our deepest hunger. However, like archeologists, we're going to dig deeper, and peel away the layers to reveal even more hidden treasure. The depths will be different for each of us, but we have to ask. Are we really hungry for Jesus, and for God's kingdom? Are we hungry enough to follow Him into the unknown, where we may not have easy access to the comforts of home? Being filled with the Lord, can our dissatisfaction be transformed into a trigger that ignites an explosive passion to create something new, beautiful, and marvelously potent, to the glory of God's name? What does it mean for each of us to be so filled with Christ that we break free from the bondage of fear into the realm of our true freedom in Him? I wonder.

Amen.