

12th Week after Pentecost, Proper 13 – Year A – August 3, 2008
Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21
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Raise your hand high if you ate breakfast this morning. Thank you. Raise your hand high if you know that you are not going to eat at all today. Thank you. You have all probably heard of Homeland Security, it makes the news quite often. No need to raise your hand, but perhaps the phrase “food security” is less a part of your everyday vocabulary. Here are a few fast facts. According to Bread for the World (www.bread.org) more than 862 million people in the world go hungry. Almost 10 million children in the two-thirds world die each year from hunger and malnutrition. And this is not just a distant problem. In the United States, 11.7 million children live in households where the members have to skip meals or eat less in order to make ends meet. That means one in ten households in the U.S. are living with, or are at risk of hunger. The definition of hunger is also known as very low food security. The news is full of stories about the impact of rising costs. Food pantries are being inundated with more and more requests for help.

You may have noticed that I added a little on the Gospel today, and included an additional story. These are the verses just prior to the Gospel lesson and put today’s reading into a striking context. Just as we’ve come to expect, once again Matthew provides us with a very straightforward comparison. When it comes to sharing the Gospel, there is no neutral ground for this committed lover of Jesus. There is no ‘perhaps’ or ‘maybe’ in Matthew’s dictionary. The two stories we heard this morning, provide us with two very different banquet accounts. The first is in the court of King Herod, the Jewish collaborator appointed to rule the region of Palestine under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. King Herod had broken with the Torah by marrying his sister-in-law, Herodias, while his brother is still alive. It was Herodias’ desire to put an end to John the Baptist’s condemnation of her union with Herod. And at this banquet her wish comes true. Prompted by Herodias, John the Baptist’s head is served on a platter at the request of her daughter Salome. All in all, this King’s banquet is marked by drunken revelry, Herod’s imprudent promise to Salome, incited by his licentious enjoyment of her dancing. On top of that there is Herodias’ vengeful scheme, and the summary execution of John.

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” The Gospel doesn’t tell us how long Jesus has alone before he realizes that there is a crowd of people waiting for Him. We can immediately marvel Jesus’ incredible service to God and God’s children. Even in His grief at the death of his cousin John, Jesus does not stop caring or being God’s servant of life and love, grace and healing. On seeing a great crowd of people, Jesus is said to have compassion for them, healing the sick, and then organizing our second banquet of the day. The Webster’s online dictionary defines compassion as the “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” In other words compassion is empathy in action, or a response of “being” and “doing”.

From a purely Scriptural and theological perspective, the symbolism of the feeding of the five thousand, plus women and children has several important connections. Firstly it evokes memories of God’s providential care and feeding of the Israelites on manna and other food during the Exodus from Egypt. Jesus’ banquet also has another biblical precedent found in the story of the feeding of the one hundred men on twenty barley loaves by the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:42-44). The symbolism of Jesus’ prayer and breaking of the bread to share is also highly suggestive of the Last Supper and the institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion. The number twelve is also important. The twelve baskets full of leftovers are likely representative of the twelve tribes of Israel, as well as God’s generous abundance. As interesting as all this is, you and I must move beyond the desert landscape of ancient Palestine and take the time to allow this message to soak into our own being and doing. The context of the Gospel is temporal, but the message is eternal. Our work is to discern the Word for our

context.

As a contrast to the murderous banquet of King Herod, Christ the King has a lot to say about how to honor guests and strangers. As Matthew no doubt intended in this juxtaposition of the two banquet stories, we see a radical difference between the lives of those who disdain God and God's commandments, and those who seek God and embody God's will in trust and faithfulness. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out that a significant portion of our lives are lived in the kind of vengeful, violent, and competitive dog-eat-dog milieu that is entirely consonant with the unsavory court of King Herod's reign. Just turn on the TV, listen to the radio, surf the web, or read a newspaper. The horror stories are not that different from those we might associate with King Herod's profligate and Lawless life – that is a life where God has little or no leading role. How familiar does this sound: murder without consequences; the exploitation of women; the failure to simply do the right thing, and to eat our words when they have been spoken rashly.

Again, we don't have to look far to get a handle on what the right thing is, the story of Jesus' compassion, healing, and feeding of the people is a very good start. You and I must consider carefully how what we see, read and hear in God's Word intersects with your gifts and mine in service to our Lord. Not everyone is called or gifted to be the host of a banquet. Not everyone is called or has gifts for the ministry of healing. However, I can guarantee that there are such gifted ones right here in our own congregation. You know who you are! Equally, for those of us with different gifts we are still here to serve; different gifts are simply complementary gifts. Each and every Christian has been blessed with at least one, and often more than one spiritual gift. We can be certain that each of us is called to use our gifts in response to God for the building up of the Body of Christ. Does that mean that we only use our gifts for the benefit of this community? Is this community the entire Body of Christ? No!

As such, it is smart for each of us to discern what our spiritual gifts are. As we grow confident in the ministry of our gifts, whether we start small or big, and as God continues to bless the work of our hearts and hands, there is always a multitude of opportunities to love, serve and honor God and our neighbors. One of the most exciting parts of ministry is that whenever we start to get comfortable, we can be sure that God is not done with us! There is no border or boundary that can contain God, and nor is there any border or boundary that can contain our mission to practice God's graciousness as a community and as individuals. I wanted to say that the sky's the limit – but there are no limits. It is as important to share God's graciousness right here amongst ourselves as it is to share outside these walls. Look at this community's contributions to The Love Kitchen and the Bread of Life Mission. Remember, God's love doesn't stop at a State or national border, and neither does ours. And so we too must do what we can to serve others in those faraway places that we may never visit, but where we can touch lives for the good that God desires throughout the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is truly kingdom living. Sharing God's amazing grace, and truly being the Body of Christ, that is a living signpost for the people of a lost and broken world. Here **is** hope, here **is** love, here **is** compassion, here **is** healing, and here **is** food for body and soul. Here is life. And here at the Church of Our Saviour is just one of many examples of practicing God's graciousness that we celebrate today as "First Fruits Sunday" to benefit the Love Kitchen. Everyone can be a part of this ministry. Donations, prayer, or volunteers are all important ways you and I can support hunger relief. Our parish commitment is to practice God's graciousness through the intentional stewardship of our resources – our community resources and our personal resources. This ministry is a great example of what God desires for our community and all who are a part of it. Slightly further afield your gifts to the Bread of Life Mission in Holbrook have, and continue, to change lives for the better. Isn't that the promise of Jesus Christ? Isn't that the hope and promise every Christian has to give?

We have heard about two very different kingdoms today. Which would you rather be a part of?
Amen.

