

Sunday, August 6, 2023 | Matthew 14:13-21

Good morning! It is good to be with you. I am Pastor Wenda Fry and serve in Meagher County. My Call is to the oldest ELCA Church in Montana-Trinity Lutheran in Lennep and then I also serve the Yoked Parish in White Sulphur Springs. Since the '80's it has been a combined Lutheran and Presbyterian ministry. And, for the past 3 weeks we've been celebrating! On July 16, we marked 5 years together as Pastor and Partner churches; when I started as their pastor, they also began a new partnership together. For the celebration, we "met in the middle" so to speak and had a joint worship service at the old Ringling Church in Ringling. Bishop Laurie preached and we had a GREAT Potluck Meal afterwards...Then last week, we celebrated our 5th year of Hosting a worship event called "Pie and Praise" as part of the Red Ants Pants Festival. We host this at the Band Shell on Main Street and we had close to 100 folks in attendance—97 to be exact— and we had TABLES full of GREAT pie! Today we are celebrating our Partnership in the Gospel with a joint worship service, joint choir and a joint picnic out at Lennep. We have been invited to a Hunting Cabin to have another GREAT meal. Today, in church, we are all invited to a GREAT meal. The menu includes compassion, innovation and caring for those in need.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus has just learned that his dear relative and friend, John the Baptist, has suddenly died tragically. He was mercilessly beheaded in prison by Herod. Naturally, Jesus is shocked by the news...Needing to grieve and pray, He climbs into a boat and retreats to a deserted place across the Sea of Galilee. Well, by the time he got to what he thought was going to be a solitary place—he saw a large crowd...they apparently had followed him on foot. They were sick—they were lonely. They were worried. Some of them were depressed. Some of them were grieving like he was...he is no longer alone in his shock and grief...his plan to get away by himself to pray, to wail, to talk to His Father —must now be put aside...Amazingly, though he himself is suffering, Jesus isn't irritated or annoyed that his retreat has been interrupted. In fact, just the opposite! He looks on them in love and Jesus begins to care deeply for these people who are in need and unable to help themselves.

Matthew tells us that Jesus has compassion for people in the crowd — which means, literally, that he "suffers with" them (Matthew 14:14). Jesus is moved from the depth of his heart, feeling a sympathetic awareness of their distress, combined with a strong desire to provide some relief. In Mark's version of this story, Jesus has compassion because they are "like sheep without a shepherd; and he [begins] to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). Here in Matthew, Jesus becomes their Good Shepherd, one who orders the people "to sit down on the grass" (Matthew 14:19), just like the Lord of Psalm 23 makes his sheep "lie down in green pastures" (Psalm 23:2).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd promised by the prophets. Isaiah promised in 40: 11: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." And, the prophet Ezekiel promised: "I will set up over them one shepherd, and he shall feed them" (34:23). It was promised of old that a Shepherd would gather the little ones, heal the injured, lead his sheep and feed them. This is what Jesus the Good Shepherd does in The Feeding of the 5,000 Plus!

This story is important because it is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four gospels. The feeding of the 5,000 reminds us that the Lord DOES provide in all the ways that we need. And it reminds us that the Lord meets each one of us right where we are; and He longs to feed our

spiritual needs. He longs to give us relief when we are feeling lonely, helpless, forgotten, worried, confused or depressed....I use the Moravian Daily Texts each day for my devotional and bible reading time. Wednesday was the 36th anniversary of my ordination. My late husband and I were ordained together and we always went out to one of our favorite restaurants to celebrate. I was a little sad on Wednesday and one of the scripture verses chosen for that day as well as the prayer really spoke to me: The verse was Psalm 118: 5 : “Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.” And the prayer for the day was this: “Never, O God, did you promise that your followers would not suffer—just the opposite! Yet you promise to walk beside us in our suffering and to console us with your presence and love. Thank you. In Jesus holy name, we pray. Amen.” When Jesus got out of the boat he saw the suffering of a needy crowd and He met them with his presence and his love. When we feel spiritually empty, Christ has compassion on us—he “suffers with” us and meets us with his presence and love. When we are worn out at the end of a long day, Jesus does not send us away to fend for ourselves. He invites us to lie down in green pastures, and he gives us what we need. He feeds us spiritually and then Christ breaks his bread and feeds us. He gives us what we need.

And then Jesus encourages to extend his compassion and his nourishment to others. Notice that the disciples want to send the crowds away to find their own dinners...They want Jesus to send the hungry crowd away, so that they fend for themselves...Maybe they thought Jesus had done enough...Maybe they were worried about their Friend and Teacher...Maybe they were tired...But, if Jesus had sent the crowds away—the disciples—and we—would have missed an very valuable lesson and teaching. My hunch is that Jesus looked (once more)—with compassion—this time at his beloved disciples and gently said.... “No, we don’t need to do that...They need not go away; you give them something to eat” (v. 16).

The disciples were probably dumbfounded by this since they only had five loaves and two fish—But they bring to Jesus what they have...And, Jesus takes what they give Him, He blesses it and then there is enough for everyone! And, then He gives the FUN PART to the Disciples—“YOU do it. YOU give it. HERE—you do the distributing...You SERVE. It’ll BE FUN for you to see their thankful faces.” Jesus says the same to us: “You do it. You give them something to eat.” According to the United States Department of Agriculture, about 10% of U.S. households were food insecure at some time during 2021. That means that one in 10 households across the country must participate in a federal food assistance program, or get food from a community food pantry.

As I close this message today, I want to encourage you to think about what Jesus’ words, “YOU give them something to eat.” Might mean in your context or communities...I know that we have a food pantry in Meagher County that is always in need of certain items; when I was up in Roosevelt County for the Stampede in July, my sisters and I worshiped at First Lutheran where Pastor Bonnie announced that there was a food shortage for their local pantry and that there was a need. SO—one way that we could “give them something to eat” is to help stock your local food pantry; another way would be to help cook meals for a feeding program—or maybe you could help rescue food that might otherwise be thrown away. Other communities have created a community garden, supported a farmers’ market, or have advocated for the expansion of public transportation to areas in which there are adequate grocery stores.

Jesus says to all of us today: “You give them something to eat.” Having compassion, feeding and sharing can take the form of giving regular tithes and offerings to the mission of the church. Perhaps on this Sunday you could take a special offering for ELCA WORLD Hunger and send it off tomorrow. Since Jesus provides for our every need, he wants us to share that abundance with others. Does this mean that we will have to do with less? Not at all. Notice that when everyone in the crowd eats and is filled, there are 12 baskets of food left over! Sharing with others never depletes us—it never robs us of what we need! In God’s provision and abundance, there is always enough for all. Jesus meets us in our deserted places and offers us compassion. Like a good shepherd, he gives us what we need for life — abundant food, drink and protection. And then, because he wants us to be his disciples, he asks us to feed others with the resources that he has given us. When we do, we join Jesus in compassion and in innovation, and care for a world in need....Please join me in prayer: Gracious God, thank you for meeting our needs with your Presence and Love. Thank you for satisfying every hunger we have ever known through your Son, our Savior and Shepherd. In His name, we pray. Amen.