

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 4, 2008
Matthew 14:13-21

"It is Jesus' Gift. Give Thanks."

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Last Thursday afternoon, I was at a meeting of the Board of Zoning Appeals in the Milwaukee City Hall with Mr. Braatz, our trustees chairman, and Mr. Cody, our principal. When the matter of renewing the exception for our church sign, which is slightly oversize according to zoning ordinances, came up for consideration, Mr. Braatz introduced himself and gave the address of the church. Before He said another word, the board approved by unanimous vote the appeal to allow our sign to remain. The chairman of the committee then suggested to Andy that he should tell his preacher there to keep his message as short as Andy's words to the board. Well, with all due respect to the chairman of the Board of Zoning Appeals of the City of Milwaukee, that is not going to happen. Besides, the words of the Gospel lesson for today give us a wonderful opportunity as we face the challenges of this time to see how our Lord Jesus gives great gifts to his people as he provides for us. And in response we are called upon to give thanks. That is our theme then for today: "It is Jesus' Gift. Give Thanks." May the Spirit of the Lord focus our minds on His Word.

I. The Feeding of the 5000

The Gospel lesson for this day presents us with a miracle of Jesus: The feeding of the 5000. It is a familiar story to most Christians. In fact, the details are probably well known. Five loaves and two fish. Twelve baskets of leftovers. But of greater significance is the fact that his miracle alone is recorded in all four of the Gospels, by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It was the high point of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Yet the text begins with the words, "Now when Jesus heard this ..." What had he heard? The immediate context in the Gospel of St. Matthew is the death of John the Baptist at the order of King Herod. The cruel power of the world had silenced the prophet, the forerunner. And Jesus, wishing to be alone, went by boat to a solitary and desolate place, most likely to pray. But the crowds will not let him be alone. They hurry to the place and it is apparent that some arrive even before Jesus Himself. When Jesus arrives, he sees the great crowd, and the Gospel says, "He had compassion on them and healed their sick." Jesus could not refrain from ministering to them. The Gospel of Mark states that he began to teach them many things. The Gospel of Luke says that he spoke to them of the kingdom of God and healed them that had need of healing.

And the day was soon fading to evening, and the disciples become concerned. "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over, send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food." And Jesus says, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat." Now if you look at the four accounts of the Gospels, you get all kinds of interesting details about the things that ensued. The disciples wondering if 200 denarii would be enough to

buy bread. John relates that it was a young boy who brought the five barley loaves (the most common and inexpensive kind of bread) and the two small fish. And that then is what the disciples bring to Jesus. And the crowds sit down on the grass, Jesus looks up to heaven, and blesses the food, giving thanks, and it is distributed to the crowd. "And they all ate and were satisfied." And the twelve baskets left over were more than they started with. Those who ate were 5,000 men, besides women and children. This is a miracle. Many have tried to explain it away, but the simple straightforward words of the Scripture will not permit us to do that. Jesus, the Lord of creation, feeds his people. He provides for their needs. For He is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and He is the Redeemer. He has saved not just our bodies, but our souls as well.

The Old Testament lesson for this day is an anticipation of this event and of all the things which the Lord provides for us. "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to waters; and he who has no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen, diligently to me and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." Now there is a spiritual component in these words. They are a reminder to keep our priorities set on what is the most important goal of our lives. And so, as the Lord provides we give thanks.

It is of interest that the Hymn of the Day we sang this morning, "O Living Bread from Heaven" is a hymn from the Communion portion of the hymnal. The words that describe Jesus' miracle have in them words that have echoes of the Sacrament. Jesus took the bread and he gave thanks and he broke it and he gave it to them. The Lord provides for us. He gives us a great meal: The bread and the wine. But not just the bread and the wine: His own body and blood given and shed for us. What a gift the Lord provides and what thankful hearts with which we can receive it.

And yet the Lord also gives us our daily bread as we pray in the Lord's prayer. He feeds us. He provides for our every want. He looks over us. Over the past weeks, I have been thinking about that a little bit as I have been reading the polls and the things about how people feel about our economy and how things are going in our nation. What unbelievably negative answers people give about how things are. You hear it said the economy is in a shambles. And certainly there are difficulties. But when I look around and see things, I think maybe we should be ashamed of ourselves as a people. When we consider the great blessings the Lord gives us, the overwhelming blessings we have. Oh yes, some people may have had to downsize their cars or face other difficulties. "But having food and raiment let us be content with that." How discontented we are. How unhappy we are with things. How we feel that things could be so much better. And we don't even see the blessings that God bestows upon us day after day as he gives us our daily bread.

Give Thanks

That brings us to a very timely application of the account of the Gospel for today. How will we give thanks? The Gospel of Matthew does not give a really good answer to that question. The Gospel of John relates that the people were wanting to make Jesus their king. And so he leaves them. What is our response to the gifts of Jesus?

It is really quite remarkable that we are just a little over a week away from our annual budget meeting. But there are two Sundays in between. And the Gospel for this week is Jesus feeding the 5,000. Next week it is the account of Jesus walking on the water and Peter joining him. Two more fitting readings there could not be, especially when we consider that we are a congregation that is never really sure how we will meet our budget commitments.

I have often used these examples in my discussions at meetings and elsewhere that we need to trust in the Lord. And sometimes when I am not sure how it is going to work out, other people remind me. It is His church. We are His people, whom He has purchased with His own blood, more precious than silver or gold. We rely on Him. And in a sense we are like that young lad, who brought the fives loaves and two fish. The Lord knows our needs. The Lord provides out of His abundance. He has compassion upon us.

I cannot help but mention here amidst the many projects going on around our church and school, the volunteers who have been working this summer on the renovations and modifications in the Dobberfuhl learning center and its adjoining classroom. Their volunteer work must be worth thousands of dollars. Their service is one for which we too must give thanks to the Lord.

As we will sing at the conclusion of this service:

Lord, we pray that we Your people
Who Your gifts unnumbered claim
Through the sharing of Your blessings
May bring glory to Your name.

And so, let us pray: Lord, it is your church. Lead us with thankful hearts as your people to receive your gifts.
In Jesus' Name. Amen.