

**FOOD FOR THE SOUL**

Well, it feels GOOD to finally BE here. It seems like FOREVER since July when we decided to walk the journey of life and faith together. And I'm GLAD to finally begin! I'm not sure that Diane and I will EVER get all our BOXES unpacked, but we're HERE and ready for ACTION. Now, NORMALLY for preaching, I use the common LECTIONARY, a 3-year cycle of readings used by MOST churches and pastors these days. IF you were to read ALL the readings each week, it takes you through pretty much the entire BIBLE over 3 years. However, I'm NOT one of those pastors who feels BOUND by the lectionary. There will be MANY Sundays when, for a special sermon OR an important day, a special program OR a sermon SERIES, I will NOT use the lectionary, but OTHER readings from the Bible. And TODAY is ONE of those days.

I chose THIS particular scripture reading for TWO reasons. First: LIKE Jesus and the people He ministered to with the feeding of the 5000, WE come here today FULL of EMOTIONS. The last few years for YOU as a CHURCH community have been EXTREMELY difficult. I DON'T need to RE-HASH them for you. YOU know them better than I do. And while Jay and Ann have BOTH done a MARVELOUS job over your 3-year INTERIM period, it was still JUST that: an INTERIM period. It didn't feel SETTLED. So, I'm SURE that you bring MANY emotions here today. I'm SURE there are feelings of RELIEF that the church can finally settle down and move on. I'm SURE that there are feelings of ANXIETY, and maybe FEAR: *Who IS this ELLIS guy? Will he be a GOOD minister? Will he CARE about ME and my CHURCH? Will there be lots of CHANGES, and will I LIKE those changes?* There are LOTS of questions. AND, I'm SURE there's a lot of EXCITEMENT today as well, and HOPE about FUTURE possibilities.

And I know EXACTLY how you feel because I feel the SAME emotions today. In many ways, I come still GRIEVING. I just left a ministry that I LOVED and cherished for over 17 years, and where I WAS loved and cherished by literally EVERYBODY. And I TOO have lots of FEARS and concerns. I suppose they're the same ones that ANYONE would have making a major MOVE or life transition. *Will they LIKE me here? Will MY style of ministry be EFFECTIVE here? Are they WILLING to make CHANGES here? Is CHRIST and His MISSION the FOCUS of this church, or is it something ELSE?* AND, I too come with lots of HOPE and excitement about this church, and all of YOU, and about my WORK here. It's VERY exciting!

So, let's FACE it: THIS is an EMOTION-PACKED day for ALL of us! And in THAT sense, it's VERY similar to the day we just READ about in Matthew's gospel. THAT was ALSO a day filled with EMOTION! THAT day began with TRAGEDY. Jesus hears about the brutal EXECUTION, the BEHEADING, of His FRIEND, COUSIN and BAPTIZER, John the Baptist, by King Herod. And TO this TRAGIC news, Jesus reacts very HUMANLY. He WANTS to be ALONE – ALONE with His GRIEF and ALONE with His GOD. I don't know about YOU, but when I hear of a tragedy, ESPECIALLY the death of someone I LOVE, I need to be alone TOO. I remember when my buddy, Marty, was killed by "friendly fire" in Vietnam, after only serving only 6 months in the military. I went down to the LAKE behind my dorm at *Springfield College* and spent HOURS there – ALONE! I don't know WHY. I just NEEDED it. LIKEWISE, when I got the news that my 13-year old daughter, Lyndsey, had CANCER – stage 3b out of 4 -- I did the SAME thing, only it was in the SANCTUARY of my church. I went in there and played guitar and SANG for hours, ALL by myself! I just NEEDED that.

Well, IN today's Scripture Lesson, JESUS feels the SAME way! He NEEDS some TIME and space, AWAY from the CROWDS that CONSTANTLY surround Him. He EVEN gets in a BOAT to sail to a quieter SHORE on the *Sea of Galilee*. But the *Sea of Galilee* is just a BIG, freshwater LAKE, 12 miles long and 7 miles wide. SO, the people can SEE where He's HEADING, so they run around by LAND to MEET Him there. WHY? Because they TOO are STUNNED by the death of John the Baptist! They TOO are CONFUSED living under the rule of a MADMAN, King Herod, a man KNOWN for his INFAMOUS rampages. And SO, the masses need COUNSEL from Jesus! They NEED to be HEALED of their inner FEARS and resentments. They NEED His message of HOPE and goodness. SO, they CHASE after Him!

Now, I suppose that Jesus could say NO to them, or just stay on the BOAT out in the middle of the lake, but He DOESN'T! He feels COMPASSION for them and reaches OUT to HEAL them. But in NO time at all, the END of the day arrives, and they ALL need REFRESHMENT. His DISCIPLES want to send them AWAY, saying to Jesus: *There's NO more FOOD, even for US!* But Jesus says *NO*, and tells them to feed the crowd THEMSELVES. WHEN they OBJECT, Jesus takes the bread and fish HIMSELF, offers a blessing, and hands it to His disciples to disperse among the people. And to their AMAZEMENT, there is PLENTY. They ALL eat to their HEART'S content, and MORE is left over!

It's a GREAT story, isn't it? It BEGINS in tragedy and ENDS in triumph! And though SOME would dismiss it as a mere FAIRY tale, remember that THIS story is found 6 times in the 4 gospels. And THAT tells ME that it MUST have been viewed by the early church as one of the most IMPORTANT stories of the MILLIONS of stories that were going around about JESUS.

So, WHY was THIS particular story SO important to those EARLY Christians? Well, there are 3 ways to INTERPRET this story, and they are NOT mutually exclusive. FIRST, we can interpret it LITERALLY. And we cannot easily DISMISS that possibility, because we're talking about GOD here. If you're the creator of the entire UNIVERSE, what's the big deal about multiplying a few loaves and fishes? It's a TINY miracle! ANOTHER way it's often explained is that it's a story about SHARING. It's a well-known FACT that, in the Middle East in those days, people had POCKETS in the SLEEVES of their robes. And IF they were going OFF for the day, they'd put BREAD or some OTHER kind of food in those POCKETS to insure that they'd have FOOD when they NEEDED it. SO, when Jesus shared what HE had, THEY began pulling out what THEY had, and it became a giant POT-LUCK supper, of BIBLICAL proportions. And who knows? THAT interpretation COULD have been true as well.

But the THIRD interpretation, and the one I prefer, is called the SACRAMENTAL view. NOTICE that the gospel reads: *and they all ATE to their HEART'S content*. It DOESN'T say: *They all ate to the STOMACH'S content!* And to ME, it's as if Jesus is CLOSING this special, INTIMATE day of grieving and healing, TEACHING and SHARING, in the SAME way that WE might close a MOVING and SPIRITUAL event TODAY: by breaking BREAD together – by celebrating COMMUNION. In OTHER words, THIS meal might have been a MORSEL, a MORSEL not MEANT to satisfy their PHYSICAL appetite, but a morsel MEANT to satisfy their SPIRITUAL hunger, the hunger in their HEARTS, especially at this time of AGONY and grief, when they'd just lost the PROPHET, John the Baptist, UPON whom they had pinned so MANY of their HOPES and DREAMS. Yes, this FEEDING -- this MEAL -- is food for their HEARTS, food for their SOULS, NOT food for their BODIES. You see: this is MORE than just a simple SHARING story, or a one-time MIRACLE. It's a POWERFUL spiritual experience, when these people LEARN what it MEANS to have the deep HUNGER in their souls SATISFIED, and their hearts CONTENT.

And THAT'S why this story was SO important to the EARLY Christians! Remember: EVERY time they GATHERED in the early church, they shared COMMUNION. It was their most SACRED ritual! Remember ALSO that, by the time that MOST of the gospels were recorded, Christians were enduring WAVES of persecution throughout the Roman Empire. In MANY cases, their FAMILY, their FRIENDS and their little HOUSE churches were being systematically DESTROYED. SO, not only were MANY of them being BEHEADED, like John, but they were also being CRUCIFIED, BURNED at the stake, RAVAGED by lions, and STONED to DEATH. And they never knew WHEN it might happen to THEM! So they needed something EVERY day to give them STRENGTH, courage and hope. They needed something EVERY day to CONNECT them to the RISEN Christ and each other! They needed something EVERY day to RENEW and REFRESH their faith and empower them to LIVE their faith, in SPITE of the danger! They needed something EVERY day to ENCOURAGE them to continue SHARING the Good News of Jesus Christ, even though it made them VULNERABLE. Yes, EVERY day, they needed FOOD for their SOULS. And EVERY day, that RITUAL, the SACRAMENT of communion, FED them! And when they remembered THIS story, of the feeding of the multitudes, they UNDERSTOOD that God's great LOVE for them did not END with John's beheading. No! God's never-ending LOVE story CONTINUED, so that THEIR pain and agony was NOT in VAIN, because NOW, THEY were helping to WRITE the pages of that LOVE story, the GREATEST story of all time!

And friends, THEY were RIGHT, because 2000 years later, the LOVE story CONTINUES, only WE are now the ones helping to WRITE its pages -- by the WORDS we SAY, the DEEDS we DO, and the LIVES we LEAD. And though, at first glance, it would seem much EASIER to be a Christians TODAY, at least in America, that's just NOT true. WE may have it even HARDER! Though our BODIES are not in much danger, UNLESS we become too VOCAL about our faith -- like Dr. Martin Luther King & others have done -- our SOULS are in GRAVE danger. And THAT'S because we are ALL prone -- every single ONE of us, EVERY single day -- to breaking at LEAST the first 3 of the *10 Commandments*. Think about it! We are CONTINUALLY tempted to make GODS of things that are NOT gods, and then to bow DOWN and WORSHIP those gods that we have CREATED -- gods like MONEY and power, YOUTH and beauty, CONSUMERISM and technology, NATIONALISM and WAR, SPORTS and leisure, and SO many MORE, because remember: WHATEVER gives your life its MEANING is your GOD. And it COULD be ANYTHING! BUT, these VERY attractive and seductive tempters CANNOT satisfy the HUNGER in our SOULS! They CANNOT make our hearts CONTENT! In fact, they only DESTROY souls. SO, like our ANCESTORS in the EARLY church, we TOO need to keep NOURISHING our souls. And ONE way to DO that is to gather HERE at this TABLE of communion, this TABLE of new life, this TABLE of FOOD for the SOUL!

Therefore, I think it's APPROPRIATE that you and I should BEGIN our journey together by bringing ALL of the EMOTIONS that we feel today to this TABLE, so that the RISEN Christ might offer us HEALING and hope; VISION, peace and love. It's ALSO appropriate that WE, like our early Christian ancestors, should then come to this table for renewal REGULARLY, in order to receive the FOOD for the SOUL that the Risen Christ OFFERS us. And it's ALSO appropriate that we keep COMING here because, AS we ALL know, ALL-too-well, this world is STILL full of BAD news! Our lives are STILL confused and fearful! And our SOULS are still HUNGERING to be SATISFIED, even in this land of OVER-ABUNDANCE. You know, friends: IN my mind's eye, I can almost SEE you and me RUNNING after Jesus, LIKE those in our Scripture Lesson, crying out for HEALING and hope. And I can see His heart goes out to US as well. He gives us this FOOD for our SOULS and tells us to EAT to our HEARTS' content. Amen.