***GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER: 5000 GUESTS***

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Texts: Exodus 16:1-7a, 13-21, 31, 35 and Matthew 14:13-21

It is the miracle recalled at church potlucks everywhere when the crowd seems large and the supply of fried chicken runs low. It is the only miracle described in all four Gospels. Out of all the healings and raisings of the dead and casting out of spirits and walking on water and turning water into wine that Jesus did – only one miracle is remembered and recounted by Matthew, Mark, Luke **and** John: the feeding of the five thousand, which is really the feeding of a lot more than that since five thousand numbers only the men and not the women and children who also came and watched and listened and ate with them.

It is not the most spectacular of all the miracles. It is hard to imagine anything more spectacular than the raising of four-day-dead Lazarus and the daughter of Jairus. Those miracles inspired awe and fear on the part of the crowds and religious authorities, according to the Gospel writers. But at the feeding of the five thousand, there is no mention of awe; the people are fed, the leftovers are gathered up in baskets, and then everyone goes home. No one gets all worked up over it. It is a somewhat understated miracle – feeding a crowd – yet every Gospel writer deems it important to include in his account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

As the day dawns in Matthew’s account there is no hint of the miracle to come. The day begins with news that John the Baptist has been killed, beheaded by Herod at the behest of Herod’s wife and daughter. It was that news that prompted Jesus to jump into a boat and row to a deserted place away from Herod, the crowds, the disciples and everyone else. Even the Son of God needs some breathing space, some time for himself from time to time. John was his cousin, the one who had baptized Jesus, the one who had recognized him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” the one who had prepared the way for him. Now John was dead and Jesus needed time alone, perhaps to mourn or to pray or to seek divine counsel or to reflect on what John’s death might mean for him. Matthew doesn’t tell us exactly why Jesus rowed off on his own, only that he did – or at least tried to.

In the hectic pace of life there is precious little time for such quiet space apart. The ever-present smart phone brings the world along with you wherever you go with incessant pings to remind you that you are in demand, unless you are willing to turn it off, set it aside or leave it at home. The quiet dinner for two may be quiet because both partners are looking down at their phones the whole time. A host of folks walk the beach with phone in hand or glued to an ear, oblivious to the sand and surf for which they came. People complain about the rat race they run day after day without stopping to consider that it might not be such a good thing to be a rat in the race. Weeks are crammed into days which are crammed into hours which are crammed into minutes until people fall exhausted into their beds and wonder why they don’t sleep well. In the morning 80% immediately check their phones, most of those before even getting out of bed. Many bemoan or even boast about how busy they are as if it was all beyond their control, as if there was no way out of the fast lane until “death do us part.”

I know that you are busier than Jesus and more in demand than he was, but as his disciple could you at least TRY to follow his example? Jesus rowed away from it all to take time for some peace and quiet in the midst of the chaos. Might you take a little time for yourself to be idly holy instead of holier-than-thou busy for a change? It is what a Sabbath’s rest was meant to be before it was corrupted by a host of blue laws on one hand and rampant materialism on the other. Take a walk. Take a nap. Take time to smell the roses. Take a break before you break. Be still and know that God is God – and you aren’t and you aren’t expected to be!

The Son of God needed time alone, time to get away and rest, but admittedly Jesus was unsuccessful in his attempt that day. First the crowds and then the disciples flocked on foot to the deserted place where he had gone, which of course made it no longer deserted. You might expect his reaction to their intrusion to be angry frustration or “can’t you just leave me alone” exasperation, but instead Jesus had compassion for them. Tired as he was, longing as he was for time alone, Jesus responded with loving compassion to the human needs that confronted him in that deserted place. He healed the sick who came to him – one after the other – hour by hour throughout the day and into the evening, and still they came and stayed and were healed and watched and waited in that no longer deserted place. There were a host of healing miracles performed that day, but Matthew tells us nothing about them beyond this: “he cured the sick.” All the details were saved for the miracle at the end of the day, after the healings – the feeding of the crowd.

As the sun set there were still five thousand men and their families hanging around –waiting to be healed or celebrating their healing or just watching the show. The crowd wasn’t begging to be fed, but the disciples suggested to Jesus that he send the crowd home for supper. Perhaps the disciples were truly concerned about the lack of food in that barren place for five thousand guests, or perhaps they were hungry and ready for the day to end, the crowd to disperse, and everyone to go home. Like the friends in Slippery Rock who had dinner guests who stayed and stayed and stayed until Red finally said to Eileen, “Let’s go to bed so these nice folks can go home” maybe the disciples just wanted the crowd to leave and thought the crowd had missed the obvious clues – setting sun, no food. They thought it time for everyone to call it a day, go back to town and eat – in that order. But Jesus turned the tables on the disciples and told THEM to feed the crowd in that deserted place with no dessert in sight!

Then comes the miracle. No one knows how it happened, though theories abound. Five loaves and two fish were all the disciples could muster and it seemed to them, as it would to us, woefully inadequate to feed such a crowd. But in the hands of Jesus the impossible becomes possible, the inadequate more than adequate. With five loaves and two fish blessed and broken and given by Jesus, there was enough to feed the five thousand plus who had gathered there, and still they had twelve baskets of scraps left over. It is that miracle that all the Gospel writers recall. It is a living illustration of the words we repeat each week in the Lord’s Prayer: *Give us this day our daily bread*. It hearkens back to the manna in the wilderness – the holy “what is it” – that fed the hungry Israelites for forty years. “Send them away to fend for themselves,” said the disciples. “YOU feed them,” said Jesus. They couldn’t – they had only five loaves and two fish. But with those same fish and loaves, Jesus fed five thousand plus, and they were filled.

Where we see insufficiency God sees abundance. Where we see impossibility, God sees opportunity. Where we see a God-forsaken place, God is there. It is perhaps that message that all the Gospel writers want us to hear – that with Jesus all things are possible, that meager resources are never a reason to abandon hope, that there is no wilderness in which God is not present with us to do marvelous things.

In the world today there are a lot of people in need of healing and some looking for help in deserted places and some who are searching for a safe place away from the chaos and some who are just hungry. There are a host of needs and a ton of angst and no leaders who seem up to the task, our selves included. But the Feeding of the Five thousand testifies to the power of God at work in all kinds of places in the face of impossible odds to meet all kinds of needs through all kinds of people. With God all things are possible – even healing for our broken world and the feeding of the world’s hungry souls.

The five thousand fed in that deserted place were healed and fed by the grace of God in Jesus, and so are we. God meets our needs day after day, in tangible and intangible ways. When we are tempted to tell others to go and fend for themselves, Jesus says, “YOU feed those who hunger and give drink to those who thirst and heal those who need healing and help those who need help.” For here and there and everywhere, God can do marvelous things in us, through us, with us and, when necessary, despite us. That is good news for us and for the world.

And one final note: after the crowd had been fed and the leftovers gathered, Jesus sent the disciples and crowd on their way. Then he went up the mountain to pray by himself, alone in a deserted place, and perhaps there found at last what he had been seeking since the dawn of that day – the AAH in AH-MEN! May you find that aah as well, if not today, then someday soon. Amen