

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 25, 2021  
“How Shall We Feed Them?” (John 6:1-15)

Last week, I invited you to think of a time when you were extremely tired; a time you were at the point of total exhaustion. We discovered from our gospel text that Christ encourages us to rest, to be renewed and recharged by spending time alone with God. When we rest in God, we bring a healthy balance to our lives that allows us to bear life’s burdens and to be more effective witnesses of the gospel.

Today, I invite you to think of a time when you were really hungry; so hungry that, as the saying goes, you could eat a horse. I’m sure we’ve all experienced such hunger, but those occasions are very rare. Because we tend to be isolated from it, we fail to realize that hunger is a very common condition in our world. The world is filled with hungry people.

Many hunger for the basics of life: food, clothing, shelter. Thousands die each day due to food insecurity. Children are robbed of their potential because of malnutrition. Others suffer because of a lack of proper health. Right here in America, the richest country in the world, people live in cardboard boxes, they wear plastic bags for clothing, and children starve.

But hunger doesn’t end with the necessities; it only begins there. People are also hungry for security, particularly as the rate of crime rises in our communities. Folks just don’t feel safe anymore. Think of the countless security systems installed in our homes and in our cars. Think of the many people who have access to protective weapons.

People hunger for love, as well. A basic human need is to love and to be loved. But many feel alone, abandoned, and unloved. They long for the slightest interaction with another person – for a smile, a touch, a hug.

Self-esteem is another hunger people experience: to feel that they matter to others and that their life makes a difference. In a world of eight billion people, it is easy for the individual to become lost. We wonder who are we compared with so many others?

Beyond these physical and emotional needs, there are also spiritual needs – spiritual hunger. Chief among these are the need for forgiveness when we have done wrong, the need for God’s presence in our lives, the need for faith in the face of life’s uncertainties.

Our world is full of hungry people. And as we see the masses of hungry people with starving bodies or malnourished souls, our hearts go out to them. But how are we going to feed them? Where do we begin to feed all those hungry bodies and souls? Those who are hungry for grace, hungry for love, or just plain hungry? And once we start, will we ever finish?

The people following Jesus were hungry. They had heard Jesus’ words and seen the miracles he performed, and they yearned for more. They understood that the things he told them were more than just pretty sayings. He spoke to them about the kingdom of God and talked about a heavenly banquet where all would be fed.

They knew the miracles he performed were more than just entertainment, more than some circus sideshow. The things he did were out of compassion and love. The healings and exorcisms were demonstrations of the hand of God, visible signs that God was still with Israel in a saving way. Therefore, the people wanted more. They hungered for freedom from Roman oppression. They hungered for justice for all those who had been trampled by the rich and powerful. They hungered for the power of God to be manifest in their lives. So they sought out Jesus, God's Son.

In fact, their hunger was so great that they were driven to extremes. A truly hungry person will do anything to satisfy their hunger, and these people were desperately hungry. They left their business, their farms, their homes, and the activities of their daily lives just to witness the traveling wonder worker. On this particular occasion, 5,000 of them came.

Jesus had tried to get away from the crowds by traveling to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, yet the people followed him, driven by the spiritual hunger that consumed them. Yes, these people were hungry for God, and Jesus knew it. He knew that they were lost, like a sheep without a shepherd. But they were also just plain hungry. They had come a long way to see Jesus, and it was now late in the day. They needed something to fill their empty stomachs.

Jesus understood this hunger, as well. While fasting in the wilderness, he also had felt that great emptiness in his stomach. He knew these people needed bread. Jesus knew what he was going to do. He was going to feed these people. If he had to call down bread from heaven like Moses, he was going to give them something to eat. But he was going to feed them more than just bread for their stomachs. He was going to give them spiritual food. And this would be a great teachable moment. Jesus would show his disciples that by feeding the crowd's physical hunger, he would also feed their spiritual hunger.

So Jesus turned to Phillip and said, *Where are we to buy bread to feed these people?* Now, I'm sure Phillip was completely surprised by this question. His initial reaction was, *How in the world could we feed so many? Why, it would cost six months wages to buy just a morsel of food for all of them. Feeding this crowd is not in our budget, and there's simply not enough money in our treasury.* But then Andrew appears. *Lord, I found a boy with five loaves and two fish. It's not much, I know. It certainly can't feed all these people, but at least it's a start.*

Because the people were hungry, Jesus took the small boy's lunch and went to work. *Make the people sit down*, he commanded. After the people were seated, Jesus took the bread and blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples. And he did the same with the fish. The disciples distributed the food to the people and, to their surprise, all ate until they were filled. Then Jesus told them to gather up the scraps. As they did, each of them filled a basket. Five thousand people had just eaten from five loaves and two fish, and there was more left over than what they began with.

Phillip had been overwhelmed by the hunger of the people because he knew he didn't have the resources to feed them. But Andrew responded when Jesus commanded them to feed the crowd. And the way he did it is important. He brought to Jesus what little he had. When he did, Jesus took that meager offering – so small in comparison to the greatness of the need – and he

multiplied it so that it would meet the need. What's more, there was plenty left over. A true miracle of God's abundance.

The people were now satisfied, but they misunderstood what had taken place. Jesus had miraculously filled their bellies and that became their focus. They realized that such a man as this could bring them national security. If he could single-handedly feed 5,000 people, he could surely make the Romans go away. So they tried to make him king. But Jesus resisted and withdrew from the crowd. His point was that just as he had fed them physically, he could also feed them spiritually. That's why he had come: to satisfy their spiritual hunger, to give them a taste of the goodness of God.

Our world is filled with hungry people. And Jesus now turns to us, his modern-day disciples, and says, *Feed them*. Like Phillip, we say, *Lord, the need is just too great. We don't have the resources to feed all the hungry. We don't have the time, energy or people to bring the good news to the lost souls of the world. Besides, feeding the multitudes is not in our church budget. We'll just pay our mission support and let the Synod worry about that.*

But friends, our excuses won't feed the hungry any more than Phillip's excuses fed the multitude that day. John's gospel shows us that it was Andrew's offering that made the difference. What we learn from this passage, then, is this: God accepts our meager offerings of time, energy, and material resources, and multiplies them. It wasn't Andrew, with his gift, who fed the hungry. It was God who fed them.

In the same way, we don't have to feed the hungry with our meager offerings. None of us can fill all the empty places in the world's stomachs. None of us can fill all the void in people's hearts. None of us can satisfy all the longings of people's souls. Only Christ, the Son of God, can do that. Still, Jesus calls each of us to participate in that miracle of feeding the multitudes, whether they be 500, 5,000, or five billion. It is not what we give that meets people's needs. It is what God does with what we give that makes a difference. So don't be overwhelmed by the magnitude of need in our world. Just offer the few loaves and fishes you have and let the Master bless them. Then stand back and watch a miracle unfold.