

Picnic in Paradise
A sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
3 August 2008
Text: Matthew 14:13-21

“Outstanding new wine list mirroring the global flavors of [the] cuisine;” “first class dining experience;” “the best cassata cake I have tried in the entire country;” “the flavors unfold like a gourmet meal, [at] one of the nation’s best eateries.” A sampling of restaurant reviews from Provence? Paris? New York? Nope, they’re talking about Cleveland! A *Plain Dealer* story this week highlighted the praise our city’s food and entertainment establishments have earned from food writers across the nation. Though we suffer an appalling lack of self-esteem, Cleveland need not apologize for its dining options.

....at least for those who can afford it. The other side of the equation, of course, lies with the families and individuals who cannot; who struggle to make ends meet; who have to choose some months between setting food on the table or paying the rent; the chronic poverty that has made our city one of the poorest in the nation. The ironies between those two realities abound. Apparently as a city, we’re stuck somewhere between uncertainty of our assets and being overwhelmed by the needs clearly in front of us. We don’t have enough; we’re not enough; there simply isn’t enough.

The gospel reading for today is strikingly familiar as a story of scarcity and abundance. It involves profound and widespread hunger and fulfillment beyond imagination. A tiny lunch, and baskets of left-overs. So little, and yet so much. Jesus has just learned about the violent death of his cousin John, beheaded by a ruler fearful of his growing popularity. Seeking solitude and space to grieve, he takes a boat to get away. But even there, he is pursued by a crowd with hungers not so different from our own. . . for understanding, healing, forgiveness, strength, purpose, time. Listen for God’s Word

in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew in the fourteenth chapter, at the 13th verse. [MATTHEW 14:13-21]

Remember pop quizzes? The church version goes like this: YOU ALL are going to preach the sermon today. Here's a loaf of bread—just one loaf. And here you are, worshiping so patiently. Maybe you rushed around to get here and didn't have time to eat. Or maybe breakfast is just a memory and your stomach is starting to growl, anticipating the next meal. Is this one loaf enough to feed everyone? Let's find out. Please tear off a piece—as much as you'd like--- and pass it along so that every man has opportunity to receive (women and children too!). [at 10: Don't forget the choir, and the ushers, er, “working” out in the narthex] I'll keep preaching, but would the last person please bring whatever is left up into the chancel?

The scripture text describes what is commonly called the “feeding of the 5000” (though presumably the women and children got to eat also!), the only miracle story about Jesus told by all four gospel writers. The accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are all remarkably consistent, which means this was an important story for the early church, one that was widely shared and often retold.

Here we imagine Jesus as weary and sad, dealing with sorrow and loss, perhaps even glimpsing through John's death, a hint of what lay in store for him as well. He could have ignored the crowd, got back in the boat and sailed away; he could have asked the people to give him space, telling them he had no more to give them right then; in the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar, Jesus explodes in frustration, screaming that he is just one individual, as much in need of rest as the next guy, and fed up with their demands.

But Jesus does none of these. With every reason in the world to respond in anger, avoidance, or despair, he chooses compassion. He looks at the crowd and sees, not a faceless “crowd,” but collection of people--- each one particular, each

one a beloved person whose lives are worthy of Jesus' concern. There's a woman with a baby in her arms, a toddler whining at her feet; over there is an elderly man whose face is lined with living; and look at that young boy whose eyes gleam with high hopes, untested by reality. He sees all these persons, and lays aside his own need in favor of theirs. A reminder that God cares about the hurts and hungers of God's people, all the time. God listens when we voice our need, and never refuses to extend healing love and transforming power.

....And bread! Lots of bread. The biblical story notes there was enough for the whole crowd.....with twelve baskets left over!

A colleague of mine once preached a Lenten sermon series entitled "Things I Wish Jesus Hadn't Said"---including "love your enemies," "forgive one another 70 x 7" and his directive to the disciples when they tapped him on the shoulder and suggested he disperse the crowd to go find food: "You give them something to eat." *You give them something to eat.* Hello, Jesus. Reality check! There's no money, no fast food, and no grocery store. Okay, we have these 5 loaves and 2 fish, but that's not enough; that is definitely not enough!

And Jesus says, "Bring them here."

A popular interpretation of this text suggests that almost everyone in the crowd that day had a little something tucked away in their tunics, a brown-bag lunch they imagined was just enough for themselves and their family. But when they saw how freely the disciples offered to share what they had, they all brought out their food and passed it around. Perhaps the true miracle was the dawning recognition of the resources they did have. In Jesus' hands a little becomes a lot. He helped them discover that available resources freely offered can be enough, and more than enough. In fact, he said to risk it. You give them something to eat. Contemporary followers of Jesus cannot dismiss these words as anything less than a mandate to feed the hungry. Jesus gave to his disciples the responsibility

to respond to human need. Yet he did not leave them alone either.

Consider what this might mean when the church is confronted—as it is every day—with human hunger and need. Big problems that seem insurmountable. Complex issues with no easy answers. There is so little we can do. We don't have enough!but what would happen if we brought what we do have and offered it to God's work of feeding a world hungry for bread and justice and peace? The disciples simply followed Jesus' lead. They didn't calculate the cost; he didn't give them a blueprint or a spreadsheet. They did what he told them to do----- and with "only" five loaves of bread and two fish, spread a table big as heaven; a feast unfolding before their eyes; a picnic in paradise. So we'll continue to serve supper at the Bethany Church soup kitchen; we'll walk to raise money for the Cleveland Food bank; we'll distribute Thanksgiving food baskets. And because we cannot live by bread alone, we'll bake cookies to send to troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan (a project sponsored by Church Women United and our own Fairmount Guild). And yes, we'll continue to enjoy meals at Cleveland's world-class food establishments, even as we work toward a day when all people can eat their fill.

Did you notice in the way this story is written some parallels with another picnic in paradise—the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? How Jesus "blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples....and all ate and were filled." Surely the gospel writer intended his readers to make that connection. Christian faith is a life lived in "communion" with others and with God. We are invited to come to this table just as we are, however broken or hungry. We may not even be aware of our true condition—neither the abundance of our resources or the magnitude of our need. Still Jesus invites us to come and dine. The chunk of fragrant bread mixed with the sharp tang of grape juice is a physical reminder of a spiritual reality: God's grace is good. And good for us. We need bread and love and Spirit and hope—and all that is offered to us in abundance.

There is enough and more than enough to serve body, mind, and soul. So much from so little.

We celebrate communion [every week/every month], but I was reminded of its power recently at a Sunday service that did not include the sacrament. Anita had called the children forward for their message as usual, but for some reason the only child present that day was six-year-old Owen Tafe who gamely walked down the aisle and sat all by himself on the chancel step. But then, without warning or preparation, five big boys—high school students---vaulted out of their pews and made a beeline for the chancel to sit beside Owen so he wouldn't be alone. I can't imagine a holier communion.

[GET THE LEFT OVER BREAD FROM THE CONGREGATION]

Friends, come to a picnic in paradise, where you will be served as well as energized to serve. This bread is yours for the taking. It is yours for the sharing. It's more than we could ever want, and all we'll ever need.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS YOU TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

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