

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2023

Isaiah 55:1-5

Romans 9:1-13

Matthew 14:13-21

Sometimes I'm asked and sometimes I'm told. Parishioners talking to their pastor is a beautiful thing. Most of the time, folks believe me just because of who I am. I can see them thinking to themselves: "Well, he must know what he's talking about. Just look at that collar he's wearing." Sometimes folks think that I think that I know more than I truly know and that's when I'm either asked or told. Oh, I totally dig it. Being called out on something that I've said is a stimulant to me – it gets the theological wheels turning and the cognitive juices flowing. Sometimes I say something that seems to someone to be just a step too far and that's when I'm either asked or told – always politely. "Pastor, aren't there some things that are just a mystery, some things that we'll never know for sure?" That's the being asked bit – the question is designed for an affirmative answer and is put up as a roadblock. Don't go there pastor. You're out of your depth here, bro. Sometimes, I'm just told. "Well, that's just one of God's mysteries. You'll never fully understand it whether you're wearing one of those fancy collars or not."

I get it; God's ways are not our ways and some things aren't meant to be discovered. There is such a thing as genuine mystery. God certainly doesn't fit neatly under man's microscope. Ah, but some things *are* meant to be discovered. In the movie *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, the boy Elliot led the little space creature to where he wanted E.T. to go by dropping Reece's Pieces on the path. Does God do that with us? To be sure, we're investigating a mystery. Here's the first question: "Did Jesus know what He would do for the NT church *before* He fed the 5000?" Did Jesus know that He was going to die on the cross, that He would rise on Easter, and that He would feed His church His body and blood *before* He fed all those hungry people out in a desolate place with merely five loaves and two fish? Let's go a bit deeper. When God created Adam from the dust of the earth and Eve from one of Adam's ribs, did He know that He would give humanity His Son's body to eat and His blood to drink? Is it possible, just possible, that God created us so that we have to eat nearly every day for a reason beyond a purely functional reason?

The Lord is heart-broken. His cousin, John the Baptist, had just been beheaded. It was a gruesome and profane crime. Salome had danced for her mother's husband and pleased him. Herod promised the girl almost anything as a gesture of slobbering gratitude. Salome consulted her vile mother and Herodias told her to ask for John's head on a platter. A festive plate used for sumptuous food was the instrument to mock God's holy prophet, the one who prepared the way for the Christ. When Jesus heard of it, what was His reaction? How immense was His grief? Did the depravity of man sicken Him? Jesus, in this bleak turmoil, withdraws to a desolate place by Himself (Matthew 14:13). Desolate – now there's a vivid word. What comes to mind when you hear that word? Barren, lifeless, a hostile environment; desolation is defined as a state of complete emptiness or destruction. Hiroshima on August 6th, 1945; the Garden of Eden after the fall; the heart of man who is conceived in sin; the Place of the Skull when the Son of God hung on a cross, writhing in pain; desolation.

Jesus withdrew to a desolate place and the people follow Him. Wherever He might go, the people are compelled to follow. The grief-stricken Lord ends His isolation and comes ashore to see a great crowd. He truly *sees* them. Christ sees their need, their struggles, their fears, their adversaries, their sicknesses, their death. From grief to compassion; Jesus leaves grief behind and acts to serve those in need. Those people are His church and He healed them. What comes next? The disciples tell Jesus to cut the crowd loose. “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves” (Matthew 14:16). Why? Why did the disciples think it best to cut the crowd loose? It’s natural, I suppose, but didn’t this Guy just heal a boatload of people? Who does *that*? Some say that the disciples thought that Jesus couldn’t do anything about the food need. Some say that the disciples thought that Jesus didn’t want to do anything about the food need. I say that it didn’t even occur to them that Jesus could solve this problem.

All along, Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. He knew exactly how He would heal the sickness of sin and death. He knew exactly what He would feed His church. He knew exactly who would give His church His body and blood, who would distribute His gifts at altars throughout the world. “You give them something to eat” is exactly what the disciples would ultimately do at the end of this episode, but they start out whining. “They said to him, ‘We have only five loaves and two fish’” (Matthew 14:17). Meager supplies in a desolate place for an enormous gathering of people in need, people who are away from their home. That sounds a lot like the Israelites in the desert, after they left Egypt. There’s no Chick-fil-A in the desert. There’s no McDonald’s in the Wilderness of Sin. What did God give them? He gave them Manna – the bread of angels, the bread of heaven, the bread of life. Supernatural food; on the strength of that food the Israelites made it to the Promised Land. It’s a mystery, alright, but it is also dang straightforward. God fed them. On purpose, to point to His Son, God fed the Israelites in the desert (John 6).

Those meager supplies... what does Jesus say about them? “Bring them here to me” (Matthew 14:18). I love those words. Those are mystery words, sacramental words. Five loaves and two fish were now in the employment of the Lord of heaven and earth. For the people, for the hungry people, for the need and benefit of the hungry people, five loaves and two fish were now in the employ of Christ the King. Jesus took the meager supplies, looked up to heaven, said a blessing, broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to give to the people (Matthew 14:19). The Lord, who created wheat and the fish of the sea, used natural food and made it supernatural. Why was it supernatural? Because it fed 5000 men, plus women and children! The people eat but they don’t just eat, they are satisfied, satiated, plum full. Twelve baskets full of the broken pieces were left over. The food that Jesus gave them was more than their need.

Run these words through your biblical colander. Where need increased, provision increased all the more. The exact quote is this: “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Romans 5:20). Do you know what that means? It means that God’s mercy is more comprehensive than your sin – it always will be. It means that God’s mercy is more comprehensive than the whole world’s sin. Have you ever felt useless? Have you ever brought shame on yourself, humiliated your family, distanced yourself from God, isolated yourself to a desolate place because of your selfishness, your weakness, your sin? I have. Where can we go to find compassion, help? Those ancient people who followed Christ... I get the sense that they would have gone anywhere

to find Him. Do you get that sense as well? Did faith compel them? Did God awaken faith in them so that they would hazard any risk to be where He was? Those who were healed, was their resolve redoubled afterward to follow Christ, to do everything in their power to be found in His flock? Have *you* been healed? What did *that* take? Has God shown *you* compassion? Have you steeled your resolve to follow Him always? It may strike you as a strange question, but do you *want* to be forgiven?

Where sin increased, grace increased all the more. That is the perfect description of Jesus on the cross. God's willingness to forgive is greater than our ability to sin. God's desire to love is greater than our desire to hate. It is a mystery. It is a wondrous and delightful and invigorating mystery. You are forgiven, loved, and the provision of life is literally embedded in His body and blood. It is a mystery. A pastor is the steward of the mysteries (1 Corinthians 4:1). "Bring them here to me" is what Jesus says about unleavened bread and common wine. They are meager supplies, natural food that, in His employ, become supernatural. It is a mystery but it is His Word (Matthew 26:26-29). He dropped the theological Reese's Pieces when He fed the 5000 and they lead to this straight to this altar. His provision is greater than your need. Forgiveness, life, salvation – He gives it to you freely. The theological bread crumbs lead to heaven. There's a banquet there, waiting for you (Revelation 19:6-9). The Promised Land of heaven is where we are going and we eat along the way. What a glorious mystery.