

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
31 July, Anno Domini 2022
St. Mark 8:1-9

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dearly beloved of the Lord,

During this Trinity season of the Christian Year, the readings of Holy Scripture focus us on the Church - what it is, how it is created, how it grows, and how it is sustained. And in that context, we hear of the feeding of the more than four thousand people in the wilderness. Here, in this very familiar story, we are given a beautiful glimpse of God's character and the true shape of the Church.

Hopefully while hearing the reading of the Holy Gospel, your minds were taken back to the Israelites being led out of Egypt by God's mighty hand and outstretched arm. They had been in slavery for generations after Joseph - abused, beaten, and even subjected to forced infanticide. Hardly what one would expect for the chosen people of God - a life of hard labor and their masters' whips. These hardly appear to be the free sons of Abraham enjoying the blessing of God. And finally they enjoy freedom only to find themselves led by God out into the wilderness where there is no food and no water, with the Egyptians nipping at their heels, fiery serpents biting and killing thousands of them, and God visiting them in thunder and fire on the mountain. Out of the pot and into the frying pan it would seem.

It seems the history of God's people is one of constant struggle - against the world, against sin, against themselves, and against unbelief. There is a constant need for help and deliverance. And it's true. That is the history of God's people. And it is the current state of the Church - the Church Militant. It will be so long as we are on this side of eternity. We will be plagued by the brokenness of our minds and bodies, the brokenness of our families and neighbors, the brokenness of the ground and the weather. We will suffer pain and sadness. We will suffer guilt and shame. We will suffer evil men doing evil things to us. We will suffer our own foolishness and the foolishness of others. We will suffer life-and-death decisions about ourselves and our loved ones.

There in the wilderness, Israel found herself thinking that what would make things better would be the meat pots of Egypt. "If only we had those things we would be

so much better off. We would gladly give our lives back to slavery if it meant the temporary filling of our bellies.” There in the wilderness, the crowds found themselves in a seemingly impossible situation and there wasn’t anything they could do about it. This is quite often what happens when we follow the Lord - He tends to lead us away from comfort, away from all earthly supports so that there is nothing left but Him and us. The Lord graciously exposes the reality that we are in need - constantly and for everything. And what is true physically - we have no bread, we need the Lord to provide for us - is infinitely more true spiritually - we have no righteousness, we need the Lord to save us.

And that’s precisely what He does. After the storm of testing comes the peace of Christ and His blessing to those who follow. The Israelites were flooded with quail and manna. They drank water from a rock. And the crowds ate bread and fish until they couldn’t possibly eat another bit. The Lord will and the Lord does provide - for your body as well as your soul.

I hear all too often the lambs of God cry out in the midst of great affliction - “Why bother believing? What have I gained other than a life of misery? I had hoped God would improve my situation. Instead, my Lord has led me into this wilderness. I’m hungry. I’m thirsty. My friends hate me. My coworkers think I’m weird. Every day something else blows up in my face. I can’t seem to have even a day without being filled with stress and anxiety. Even trying to do the good and right thing seems to bring nothing but more problems and hardship. I have nothing and there’s nothing I can do about it.” Some throw up their hands and leave the faith. Some despair.

But the time in the wilderness simply exposes the reality of a life of need, a life of dependence that already is the reality. We just have a way of surrounding ourselves with fluff and convincing ourselves that we’ve got things under control. We sell ourselves into slavery, serving our jobs, our sinful desires, our games, our pleasures offering ourselves to these false gods who promise they will give us joy and happiness and peace. We sacrifice the Word and gifts of Christ at the high altar of me and end up being swallowed by death.

And Satan is more than happy to play along. He will indulge your desires and make sure you have your fill. Whatever it takes to blind us to our need for Christ for all things - our daily bread and salvation. He’ll do what he can to see sure you’re comfortable, that you don’t suffer too greatly. He will ask nothing of you in return. He will tell you that “You’re a strong Christian. Don’t worry about prayer. God knows what you need and of course He’ll give it to you. Don’t worry about

hearing God's Word. You already know it anyway. Don't worry about receiving absolution and receiving Holy Communion. God knows your heart, that you believe in Him. Your sins aren't that big a deal. Just enjoy them. You're only human after all. God doesn't really expect you to be perfect. Doesn't He say that He will forgive you anyway?" And such demonic lies are music to our ears! "You're right. I am a strong Christian. I believe. God knows that. I don't have to pray or read the Bible or go to church or avoid what is sinful to prove that. And, hey, I'm better than most people. I have some faults but no really big sins to worry about."

When we begin to believe these lies and think this way we have begun to trust in ourselves rather than Christ. It's no longer about receiving life from Jesus. We become arrogant branches who think they no longer really need to be attached to the vine. This thinking is the slavery to lawlessness that leads to further lawlessness. When we separate ourselves from Christ, when we no longer hunger for the presence of Christ found in His Word and precious sacraments, and imagine that He is here on our terms according to our schedules in the ways of our choosing, then we have sold ourselves back into the slavery of self-righteousness and a life of sin. We have departed from Christ. We are no longer sitting at Jesus' feet with the crowd of sinners being taught and fed by our Lord.

"Take heed lest you fall." None of us, not a single one of us can remain in Christ and persevere in faith apart from the very means by which the Lord Jesus Himself has promised to impart life and forgiveness. Apart from Jesus there is only death. Yes, you may enjoy a rich and pleasurable life now if you simply free yourself from having to be mindful of righteousness and eternal life. But eternity will find you with the rich man weeping and gnashing your teeth without hope of a drop of God's mercy.

Thus, in great love for your soul, the Lord leads you into the wilderness of hardship and want and affliction, as He led Israel and as He led the crowd, so that He can have your full attention, so that it is abundantly clear to you that there is no help apart from Him, and that He alone is your only good. And more, so that you may taste and see His compassion for you. He sees each and every one of your various needs. And He will not let them go without being met in such a way that you may be always mindful that they have come from His gracious and loving hand and that you are drawn to hungering and thirsting for life and salvation. His desire is that you would hunger not for the bread which perishes, even when it is miraculously given, but for Him, for the flesh which He has given to death for the life of world.

The Lord Jesus is filled with compassion for you and has gifts to pour out in abundance that bring peace to wearied and bruised consciences, that satisfy souls hungering and thirsting for righteousness, that lift the terrible burden of sin, that soothe the wounds of guilt and shame, and that free us from the terrible slavery to self-serving, self-destroying sin and the delusion that by our own strength and goodness we can free ourselves and earn God's love and favor. And remember, there were seven baskets full when every last person in the crowd was satisfied. God's mercy is infinitely enough for you. He does not tire of giving it to you. He loves to forgive sinners. He loves to forgive you. His compassion poured out of His veins on Calvary so that you might be absolutely certain that God your heavenly Father will hold nothing back of all that you need, all that is necessary to bring you safely through this desolate wilderness to eternal life.

In this we see then what the Church is. It is sinners in need gathering around Jesus Christ, to receive the good gifts of life and salvation from His hand. And He does this in a very particular and repeated way. First He teaches and then He feeds. He speaks and we listen. He gives food and we eat. You don't go to church to mark off a check box to make God happy. It's not about simply going to church and doing the thing. It's about going to sit at Jesus' feet and receive what He alone can give in the way that He has promised to give it (and in no other way) - through the preaching of His Word and the Holy Sacraments.

Beloved, don't measure God's love by your own abundance or lack, measure it by His Son, Jesus Christ, who, with all of His blessings and benefits, has been bestowed upon you in the waters of Holy Baptism and continues to offer Himself to You in the rich and endless feast of His holy Body and precious Blood, who hears your cries for help and delivers you. Cling to Him, no matter how deep into the wilderness He leads you, because He will provide. If a miracle is necessary to feed you, He will do it as He does here from this altar each and every Lord's Day. Let nothing distract you from Christ. Let nothing keep you away from Him. Count everything else you have and are as loss for the surpassing joy of knowing and being with Christ and in Him possessing a clean conscience before God. He is not just your highest good. He is your only good. There is nothing good if it doesn't come from Him. Every good thing that you have is good because it comes from Him to be used in faith. And if your heavenly Father has blessed you with an abundance of the fat of the land as He did Job or David or Solomon, take care that your heart doesn't rest on the gift instead of the Giver. Pray that the Holy Spirit would guard your heart from trusting in any way what you have. Take Jesus

seriously when He says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The heart that is grounded solidly in Jesus Christ knows no fear in even the worst storm, has no want, and sees through the vanity and uselessness of the pleasures of this world. Such a heart is not troubled when the heathen rage, when economies collapse, or when tragedy strikes because such a heart rests in the changeless Christ and His promises, promises that God has made to you and sealed to you in the waters of Holy Baptism.

So let us joyfully gather around our Lord. Let us be so transfixed by His promises and His grace that we lose track of ourselves and become unconcerned about where He is leading. You can be sure, no matter how remote and harsh the wilderness, your Lord will provide all things for you, turning the wasteland into lush green pastures.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.