



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday, March 19th, 2017 - Lent IV,

“So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would.”

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

A few months ago, I mentioned to a friend of mine that I had to get to work on my sermon that day. Her husband is a pastor as well, and they're both very much into the "Reformed" Calvinist tradition. As such, we love to discuss and debate and argue and spar like friends do, and this time was no different. "You can barely call those a sermon," she said. "My husband preaches for at least 30 to 40 minutes. Now THAT'S a sermon!" And I thought "that's not a sermon, that's a hostage situation," although what I said was much more polite. She said "remember, there's a *reason* the pulpit is in the *center* of our church - we focus on the centrality of the preached word!" And, not being pious enough to miss the opportunity for a rejoinder that would win this sparring match, I said "Oh, I do understand. It's the same reason the **altar** is at the center of our church; we focus on centrality of Jesus Christ."

Obviously, we were being cheeky for sport, and were sparring with one another for equal parts fun and edification; but as the old saying goes, there's a grain of truth in every joke and this one was no different. As Anglicans, we have been blessed with a focus on the spiritual value of the Holy Eucharist for our entire existence, from the ancient celtic church, through the Romanization of England, and the English Reformation which

formally re-established us, we have always had our eyes on Christ, and we have never tried to separate that from the Eucharist, even when we had to do so in secret; we have always seen it as a core tenet of the faith, and an ongoing repetition of a miracle our Lord Himself performed for those who were following him both physically and metaphorically into the wilderness.

That's one of the reasons this miracle is so incredibly important. It's not merely an act of mercy that Jesus feeds these 5,000 hungry folks, although it's a merciful act indeed. It is Jesus not only proclaiming His divinity, but continuing God's promise to provide for His people. In Exodus, the Israelites are following God (or at least Moses, who is following God) out into the wilderness. And they're fatigued and hungry. They're so fatigued and hungry, they say to Moses, "*Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*" But instead of letting them die, God says to Moses, "*Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no.*"

And that line there, “gather a certain rate every day,” does that sound familiar? It’s the origin of “give us this day our daily bread.” God tells them quite explicitly to not store things up, to not hoard; and if they do hoard, the bread will rot and be filled with worms. The only day they’re allowed to store things up is on day six, so that they won’t have to labor on the Sabbath. Otherwise, the Israelites were to trust in God alone to provide them with their sustenance; to put aside provisions in case God did not provide would have been apostasy - to not eat today so that you could eat tomorrow would be a lack of faith. “Eat and be filled today, and trust that I will provide for you tomorrow” is the message the Lord gives them; they merely have to trust it.

And just as God promised His people that He would feed them with the bread **from** Heaven, Jesus likewise expects us to lean on Him, the bread **of** Heaven, for literally everything we need in our lives.

When we come to this altar, we are partaking in a sure sign of God’s promise to feed His faithful people, and that what He gives us will sustain us. Again, it is no longer the bread **from** Heaven, it’s the true bread **of** Heaven - the mystical body and blood of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Just as the Israelites soldiered on through the wilderness, so too are to soldier on through the wilderness of this modern age, being fed spiritually by the body and blood of Christ. When we come to the altar, we are not simply going through the motions of an ancient ritual of the church; we are partaking in a millennia old faith that God provides for us all that we need, and we are saying that we believe that Jesus IS who He says He is, and that this sacrament IS what He says it is.

This feeding of the five thousand is a bold declaration that He is the thing which will sustain and nourish all those who dare to put their faith in Him. What’s more, he puts his apostles to work feeding the people this early sacrament, and establishes that any apostle or priest that follows in their footsteps is to be a servant of all those who would follow them, and continue to feed them this bread of life in both word and sacrament; in short, He is providing a perfect summary of how church life is supposed to work.

But the miracle isn’t finished yet, as John tells us that there were twelve baskets left. They ate until they were full, yet there were still twelve baskets of bread and fish leftover. And unlike the miracle in the desert for the Israelites, Jesus *does* tell His disciples to go ahead and gather up the leftovers, so that nothing be wasted. Jesus didn’t just give them as much as they needed, He gave them an *abundance*; and at the end, He insisted that *nothing be wasted*. In the blood of Christ, there is not mere sufficiency; mere sufficiency doesn’t begin to scratch the surface in what Christ offers us. In Christ, there is an absolute abundance.

Maybe there are times where we don’t want our problems to Christ, because there’s over a billion people in the world and we feel too small. But in Christ there is an abundance of understanding. Or perhaps we don’t want to go to Christ for forgiveness of our sins, because maybe it’s one we’ve struggled with for a long time - weeks, months, maybe decades? And we’re shy to ask forgiveness *not* because we don’t mean it, but because we think Jesus is sick of hearing it when He knows we’ll probably just goof up again; but in Jesus, there’s an abundance of forgiveness. Or perhaps you struggle with faith altogether and wish you knew where to find it again, but you don’t know how; in Christ, there is abundant grace, and all He asks is for what you likely already have - a bit of faith no larger than a mustard seed. Nurture it, and He’ll handle the rest...but don’t wait forever; Lent is a great time to reboot.

The sacrament of the Eucharist is Christ’s gift to us. Just as He fed the 5,000 in this miracle, He feeds us today when we come together to eat and drink of Him in this holy mystery. This is where we are recharged and fed; not only in our prayer and worship, but in our fellowship - and most mystically, in the practice of the sacraments. Use today’s Eucharist as a chance to refill and replenish whatever you’ve lost this year, whatever spiritual aches you have, and count on Jesus providing not only refreshment, but an abundance of blessing, so that you may continue to be His hands and His body here and now. *Amen*