

SERMON – August 6, 2023

No one can be in the presence of God and not be changed. Jacob stayed up all night, wrestling with God, refusing to let God go until he received a blessing. He left that place with a lifelong limp and a new name. And his life was never the same.

The disciples were in the presence of God when a young man told them to drop their fishing nets and follow him. They left behind their families and their jobs... all to follow this man named Jesus. And their lives were never the same.

When we are face to face with God, we have a choice. We can wrestle and struggle and hope that we move forward with nothing worse than a bad hip, or we can put our trust in the One who calls us, even when we have no idea of how we will get there or how we will care for ourselves and our families. Either choice can be difficult or scary. But there is one thing we can all be certain of – God will come to us sooner or later, in the most unexpected ways. And we will never be the same!

Do you remember what God said to the prophet Jeremiah?

For surely I know the plans I have for you -- plans to take care of you and not abandon you, plans to give you a future with hope.

And God has plans for us too. Plans for this congregation... plans for each of us. Plans for a future with hope. Plans that will change our lives forever in ways we cannot even imagine.

But first we must be ready to hear God's voice in our midst -- we must be fed... our soul and our bodies must be filled.

In today's gospel story, Jesus and his disciples are running on empty. They are tired... worn out by the constant pressing crowd demanding that they pay attention to each of them. And now, they have just learned that John

the Baptist has been brutally killed by Herod. They all fear that they will be the next to be beheaded or crucified... and they all grieve the loss of the one who baptized Jesus himself.

So, today they are desperately looking for a quiet place – somewhere that they can mourn and pray and be together. But the crowds don't care. They follow them, desperately looking for a healing touch, a kind word, a glimpse of being in the presence of God. And we are told, that Jesus has compassion on them.

Jesus had every reason to be angry with the crowd for interrupting his solitude, but, instead he heals and teaches them.. for hours. Even at his lowest point, when he felt empty and alone, Jesus could reach out and help those who trusted him... believed in him.

As it gets later and later, the disciples start to get frustrated. They are tired; they are hungry; they want to be alone.

"Send them home," they say, "it is getting late and surely they are hungry." We can understand their frustration. Sometimes we just want time with our loved ones, especially when there are so many demands on our time. Sometimes we just want time completely alone, to think and pray and ponder. But Jesus takes this opportunity and teaches the disciples something important about compassion... and something that they will need to remember as they go out to their own ministries. Something we need to remember too.

Jesus looks at them and shakes his head. **"You give them something to eat,"** he says

Jesus doesn't say, "Don't worry; I'll take care of it." The food does not come down as manna from the sky. Jesus wants the disciples to feed them.

"We don't have any food!" they think. How can we feed thousands of people? In disbelief, they go down into the pressing crowd to see what they can find. The results are not great: Just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Not enough to feed just the disciples, let alone thousands!

The disciples bring the food to him with no hope but something amazing happens right before their eyes! Jesus blesses their meager offering and feeds this huge crowd with that handful of food. So much food, overflowing in abundance, that there are 12 baskets of leftovers.

No one left that place the same as when they first got there. In the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the fish, they were in the presence of God. And no one is the same after that.

Of course, the disciples didn't understand what Jesus could do. They looked down at that small amount of food and thought "we have nothing." It was so small that it didn't seem possible that it could do so much for so many people in need.

It's so easy to believe that we have nothing to offer. So much tragedy and need all around us, and we are only little specks of dust in the universe. Millions of people are hungry every day and the number only getting bigger we only can give a bag of groceries. More than a year into a year into the the war in Ukraine and all we can do is donate a little more. Millions of families have lost loved ones to natural and human made disasters, and all we can offer is prayers. In the face of so much pain, it feels like nothing we do makes any difference at all.

But we have to remember that we don't do it alone. We bring more than a bag of groceries or a prayer – we carry with us the power of Jesus.

When the disciples counted the loaves and fish, they only saw loaves and fish. **They forgot to count Jesus.** When we count the small supply of groceries and cash that we can donate, we cannot forget to add Jesus into our total. If we say "I only have \$10," we only see our deficit. And we will never get anything done.

When we say, "we are only a small church with older members, what difference can we make?" we will only see ourselves get smaller and older.

We forget to count Jesus! When we forget to count Jesus, we will find ourselves holding a handful of bread and fish, and no one gets fed.

The fact is, Jesus needs us to do the work on earth. Just as Jesus need the disciples to go out and gather up the food. We are the ones who Jesus needs to feed the hungry, care for the poor, free the oppressed and speak for the voiceless. We are the ones who can go out into the world and see what we can find. When we say we are the Body of Christ, what that really means is we are the ones who continue Jesus' ministry here on earth – generation after generation.

And Jesus needs us to be the ones who bring about God's plans for us.. to bring about that future with hope.

When Jesus receives the bread and fish that the disciples have gathered, Jesus is able to do something more than share the crowd's pain. He *feeds them*. Just as he did at the Last Supper, when he took the bread and he

raised it up and he blessed it. And just like when we share communion, there was plenty to go around. In Jesus, we are nourished and we are refreshed.

And the story does not end there. After the multitudes are fed, the apostles are also nourished and refreshed. No longer weary, they are ready to go out again and work to make God's plan a reality. When we come here, to this place of worship, our bodies and spirits rest and we receive nourishment and refreshment. When we leave here, we are ready to work to make God's plan a reality, here in Maryland, in Ukraine, in the Gaza Strip and throughout the world. Miraculous things happen when Jesus is near.

So, my friends, it is time to count our loaves. And don't forget to include Jesus as you count! Then we will know that no matter how tired we may be, no matter how small and insignificant we may feel, we really can do God's reconciling work. Remember: Christ needs us and in Jesus, anything is possible.