

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13)
St. Matthew 14:13-21

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"[A]nd taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds." With these words, Jesus began the feeding of the 5000, as the men are numbered. And they are very poignant words, indeed, and certainly lead one to think of the times in which he feeds many more than 5000. St. John wrote in his account, "Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand," and, "Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated..." Those words sound so similar to what is very often heard here, in this place. Then, the fact that it was near Passover only adds to what is being taught in today's Gospel: Jesus is fulfilling the sign of Moses and pointing to His own Supper.

Now, to be perfectly clear, Jesus is not celebrating the Lord's Supper in these texts, but He is pointing to it; that is to say, He is pointing to Himself—pointing to His work on the cross and His gift in the Supper. As Rev. Peter Bender once wrote, "This feeding was a sign intended to point us to the realities and benefits of the Supper, but it was not the Supper. In the same way, the healing miracles of Jesus were signs of the resurrection of the body, intended to point us to the realities of the resurrection"—bodies made whole by Him—"but they were not **the resurrection**" (emphasis added).

But, before getting to the realities and benefits of the Supper, what is the sign of Moses?

First, understand that "when it comes to religion, people want signs and people want works. In other words, they want proof, and they want something to do." That is why the Jews were so attracted to Moses, for he had signs and he had works...at least, in their eyes.

His signs were the ten plagues, the Passover, and the crossing of the Red Sea, and more. And, in keeping with today's Gospel, it was during Moses time as prophet that manna came from heaven. And didn't Moses speak to the people from a mountain? In the feeding of the 5000, according to St. John, "Jesus went up on the mountain," where he taught the people and fed them.

Moses also had works for the people. He came down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, rules by which to live. In fact, when Moses had first come down from Mt. Sinai with other commands for the people, they responded, "All the words which the LORD has said we will do." (Exodus 24:3) In these commands and Laws, the people found direction and purpose; "Moses told them works to do, and people like works."

So, when Jesus went up on the mountain and began feeding many people with only a little bit of food, and this as the Passover drew closer, the Jews who followed Him saw in Him their hero, Moses. He was doing things like Moses did.

But, they didn't have their facts straight. It was not Moses who did those things. He did not cause the plagues, He did not institute the Passover, He did not part the Red Sea, and He did not pen the Ten Commandments. As the Lord's prophet—His mouthpiece—his task was solely to proclaim the Word of the Lord, to state that these things were coming because God is making them happen.

Still, it is always easier to put trust in what you can see and touch and smell and taste—in what you can perceive. It is always easier to put your trust in what you can understand. Moses was the hero because he was the one who came *with* the signs and works, so the improper association was made.

Jesus is fulfilling the sign of Moses. Here is a man who spoke and acted a lot like their hero. Here is a man who could give them what they wanted—signs and works. And this is very much evident in verses following today's event, for after He had dismissed the crowd, He made His way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Oh yeah, He walked on the water on His way there, but that is a lesson for... next week. But, the crowds followed Him, and when they found Him there they sought to have Him heal their sick; and, according to St. John's account, they sought to make Him their king—their “bread king” in order that He may satisfy their desires. They wanted Him to be another Moses, so what did they seek? “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” They replied, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” An odd question, given that He had *just* fed them rather miraculously. Nevertheless, they sought works and signs, just as Moses gave them, or as they believe Moses did.

Have things changed? Well, not much. The times may be different, but people are people, and people still chase after this Jesus or that Jesus, following the works and signs. For Jesus is only real if they can see or feel or experience Him. So, they flock after faith healers, because they have to have the touch of God and, thereby, be good preachers. They gather in enormous churches, regardless of what is being taught there, merely because their size is a sign that God must be blessing what they are doing, or they go where they feel uplifted and told that they are doing good things, because those things that make them feel good must be good and godly.

But, these works and signs don't have to be so grand. How easily might you become so distraught with disease and illness and the inability of medical professionals to heal you that you begin to wonder about faith healers? And do you not grow tired at times hearing the Word of God's Law proclaimed to you? Or do you grow complacent or bored with the proclamation of the Gospel for the forgiveness of your sins? Does this not make you wonder about the growth that seems to be happening in the mega-churches here and there?

Those are most certainly the signs people desire, but are they the signs God promises to provide? Where does God equate a good preacher and His blessing with the healing of diseases (as if that is the only sign)? Where does God equate his blessing with the number in the nave? Where does God equate His message with emotional peace and strength?

And as it did back then, it doesn't end with signs today, as people still seek works, too. To many, faith only makes sense if it involves some way to work your way to heaven. That is, after all, the way the world works: if you want something good, you must work hard for it; the harder the work, the better the reward, or so says the sense of justice and righteousness. The same must, therefore, apply to faith and religion. And for every religion besides Christianity—and orthodox Christianity at that—it is true. Whether it's doing good works to or for others or destroying others who do not think like you... whether it's keeping rules or how much you meditate, every false religion gives requirements to earn a spot in heaven.

And again, even Christians are susceptible to this. For instance, ask the ordinary Sunday School child how to get to heaven and they will answer, “by being good” more often than not. But, you don't need to ask a child, ask yourself. Ask yourself why you are listening right now. Is it because you want to show your devotion to God? Is it because you think you have something to offer Him? Or, is it because you believe simply listening to me earns you merit before God?

But, are these works God demands? Can listening to a sermon raise you from the dead? How much devotion do you need to show to earn God's favor? How good is good enough? Can you really do enough good works to pay off your debt of sin? Scripture says plainly, “no”: “[A]ll our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” (Isaiah 64:6)

But what else does the word of God say? “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) “That’s it: the work of God is to believe in Jesus. Believe in Jesus, and you will have eternal life.” It’s a strange message—well, maybe not to those who believe—because it goes against everything one experiences as true, that one must work for something to get something. And before you begin to think that believing is a work that you do, faith only comes by hearing, it is a gift from God. (cf. Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:8-9)

And that should lead to the answer for why you are here right now. Despite appearances, this is a worship service, emphasis on service. You are here because God wants to serve you, and in these means is where He does it. You are here to receive the Word of God, the Word that declares the forgiveness of your sins. And you are here to receive the Word of God incarnate, the very body and blood of the Son of God for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

So, the word of Christ before you this morning is this: “[A]nd taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.” The gift is from heaven, it is from God, and so is He, and so is this miracle. And that is what the Lord is teaching in this miracle. “This miracle points...to Jesus as the Christ”—the one anointed to bear your sin and be your Savior—“and the source of eternal life and salvation, which He won...upon the cross and distributes...in His body and blood in the Lord’s Supper.” For it is as He says plainly in St. John’s account of the feeding of the 5000, speaking of Himself, “I am the bread of life.”

That scandalizes many people, but it is the power of the Gospel to those who believe. Jesus said,

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. (John 6:51)

Again, as Rev. Bender wrote,

His flesh gives life to the sinful world. His flesh and blood give eternal life with the Father and the resurrection of the body from the dead. Where was His flesh and blood given for the life of the world? They were given up in death upon the cross for the forgiveness of sins, and distributed to the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Lord’s Supper that you might receive “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation” as our very own.

Therefore, “Jesus’ preaching and His body and blood are not to be separated. The one creates faith and leads to faithful reception of the other” for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Those are the realities and benefits of the Supper—of the entirety of Jesus’ work for you—and they are God’s gifts to you...gifts that declare that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.