

What are They for So Many?

Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: John 6:1-15



After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following Him, because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up His eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward Him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" ⁶ He said this to test him for He Himself knew what He would do. ⁷ Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸ One of His disciples, Andrew,

Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, ⁹ "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down," Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, He told His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that He had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" ¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by Himself.

The world is hungry again. Not only can this be seen in many African or Asian countries, but there is also a hunger among us. Hunger for energy – we will probably have to freeze this winter. Also hunger to buy the most necessary things – because inflation is so high, people can barely make ends meet with their normal income from Job Center. Every single thing in Penny or Lidl becomes more expensive.

In our sermon text today, we are also confronted with peoples' hunger. In this text, we get to know a Jesus who is not only concerned about showing us the way to heaven but also a Jesus who takes care of peoples' hungry stomachs. Thousands followed Him without taking the proper precautions or bringing provisions. Jesus first confronts His disciples with this problem. He doesn't just let bread and fish rain from heaven. Instead, He looks for a solution from His followers. They should make a suggestion. Philip, one of Jesus' disciples, quickly did some calculations and came to a terrible conclusion. The disciples could only scrape together 200 denarii which wouldn't be enough for everyone to get even a few crumbs. And they stood there with empty pockets. Each one knew it was hopeless. They are at a loss. And Jesus – what did He do? First, this text says that Jesus presented this problem so that He could test the disciples. And the question that I asked myself – what was Jesus trying to test here anyway? Did He want to test how smart the disciples are? Did He want to show how clever they are, not only in raising enough money but also in organizing a system for procuring the food and for feeding the people? No, the test goes in a different direction. Jesus wanted to test what the disciples believe! And not only what they believe. He wanted to test them to see in whom they believe! So we stand before an important question – Who or what is it that you commit your heart to? Who do you trust? Who can help you when you no longer know how you can get by with the little that you have. Because we all know that there is too little. Ever since Adam and Eve were kicked out of the fullness of paradise and had to work by the sweat of their brows, we have known this. And who do we believe in all this? We modern people have learned to depend on our own human reason. We are responsible for earning our daily bread ourselves. That is good and right. After all, that is the assignment God gave us – we are to provide for ourselves with all that we have and, if possible, also help others. And yet, not everything is said with this because our powers have limits and we

can't understand everything that happens in our world. God doesn't want us to despair in these many hopeless situations and sets against it a very strong word that connects us with Him: Faith. In the Bible, the word Faith is even used to describe something solid and sure. Faith has this exact meaning. It means that we know that in the midst of many hardships, poverty, famine, even in the midst of sickness and mortal danger, we have a firm foundation that can carry us.

Jesus wanted to test all of this when He asked the disciples to take care of the food. And what happened? A disciple named Andrew came. He was the brother of Simon Peter. I don't know if he was making a joke but what he suggested seemingly had absolutely nothing to do with the difficult reality of hunger. Andrew actually brought a little boy to Jesus. Out of all the people, this little boy had 5 loaves of barley bread and 2 fish. So really, what he had to offer was a bit more than nothing. And Andrew also adds to this offer with the question: "But what are they for so many?" It is truly a hopeless offer. Completely without effect! But Jesus appeared to be content with this. Solemnly He took the small, hopeless leftovers from the boy, looked to heaven, and gave thanks! What a moment! It is a moment where everything is concentrated on Jesus. And it's good that our eyes are firmly turned toward Jesus because Jesus is truly, in person, the mystery of the miracle that is set before us here because in this miracle, it becomes clear that this is only possible because the almighty Creator, God, is at work – the same God is at work who let manna and quail rain from heaven to the Israelites! The same God who brought forth life in the first place. It is He who stands before us in Jesus. And the almighty God shows us here that He cares for us. He takes upon Himself our hardships. He is with us... even, and especially then, when everything appears to be hopeless. The almighty God cares for us, takes that which appears hopeless, and makes something great out of it! All of this goes out from Jesus' hand and the secret that Jesus brings before us is that nothing is too small to Him, and no situation is so hopeless that He must turn away from it in shame. Nor is anyone so far removed from God that God can't bring him closer again. The story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is truly a Christian story that should not only fill a few empty stomachs, but it is a story that wants to show us something essential about Christianity. Martin Luther said this in a sermon he wrote based on this same text: "We should use this story to practice and strengthen faith. For it is not prescribed for us to read alone (the devil can do that too!), but that it may remind and awaken us, that we may believe and say: What Christ did then, He can and will do still today." We are certainly still in the situation today where we must groan and complain: "What are they for so many?" For many, work is too much and he or she doesn't know how they will get by with their small reserves of strength. Some groan about the burden of congregational work. How can we reach many people with the little that we have? What's the next step for us? And how will my life as a Christian still be possible in an un-Christian world? The story about the Feeding of the Five Thousand directs our focus away from the barley bread and fish. Our focus is directed away from the many hardships and directed towards Jesus. Everything comes from Him and leads back to Him. We aren't the ones who can solve all the many problems with our strength and intellect. But Jesus can!

And this becomes exceedingly clear in the story, especially later on. When we continue to read the Bible, we notice that the Israelites were so excited by this miracle of bread that they now wanted to have Jesus with them forever. But they had misunderstood Him. They wanted the bread from Jesus and not Jesus Himself. They wanted a bread king. But Jesus didn't want to give us just bread, but Himself! And that's just what Jesus said to the Israelites: "I am the bread of life...whoever eats my body and drinks my blood has eternal life!" With this, Jesus came to the main point of the miracle. Jesus gives Himself completely so that we can live. This is the great word against all the difficulties of our world! Jesus for us! Jesus, so that we can live – here and now but also forever. It's only about Jesus. Challenges, hardship, and even famine will always exist. And we will always be faced with this challenge - "What are they for so many?" Jesus shows us that we cannot, nor must we, save the world. That's why Jesus came! Jesus does all of that! And yet we may be here and there, even as a completely hidden follower. We may hear His words... and then do them. We may collect the leftovers! And in the end, when the 12 baskets are filled to bursting, there is no more complaining. Amen.