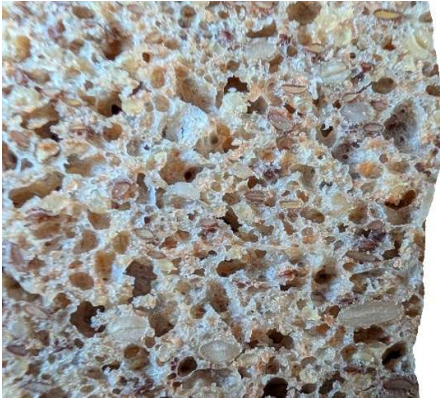


Day of Harvest Thanksgiving

Mark 8:1 – 9



Jesus Feeds the Four Thousand

1 In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, 2 "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. 3 And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." 4 And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" 5 And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." 6 And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them

before the crowd. 7 And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. 8 And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. 9 And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. 10 And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

The amazing idea of not merely eating raw wheat, but grinding it and then drying the first loaves of bread on a hot stone first came up thousands of years ago. Many millennia would pass before people learned to use yeast and actually bake bread. Still thousands of years more would go by before they learned to produce the wonderful variety of breads we enjoy today. Bread remains a marvel to this day. It is a staple in almost every culture. What would have happened if, at some point over those thousands of years, a single generation had simply wiped the accumulated experience and recipes from the hard drive of memory? What if just one generation, out of sheer selfishness, had thought: "We don't want our descendants to enjoy our bread"? I know the same could be said of many other things. Yet bread is one of the most essential foods of our lives; it remains the very embodiment of our sustenance. That is why Jesus took a loaf of bread in his hands and gave thanks to God. Yet the bread itself is not the focal point; rather, it is Jesus who stands at the center. He is the one who stands between God and our basic needs, offering thanks to God. The people of that time evidently understood that man does not live by bread alone, for they had come primarily to hear Jesus preach. Yet amidst this, Jesus saw the people's very real, everyday need. They had nothing to eat, and He expressed this by saying, "I have compassion for the people." The fact that Jesus cares for our daily needs is a recurring theme throughout the Gospels. He cares for the sick and teaches us to pray: "Give us our daily bread." That is why we are celebrating a feast today. We gather around His table. We give thanks not only for courage, confidence, and happiness, but also for fruit, vegetables, bread, wine, and sugar. And yet, the celebration is not without obstacles—neither back then, when the four thousand gathered around Jesus, nor today. Back then, it was quickly calculated that seven loaves of bread would not go far among four thousand people. Today, we are still aware of our own shortages. We realize that, in so many ways, what we have is simply not enough. We worry about our livelihood. We worry about our world and whether we will still be able to live here in peace in the future. In doing so, we also realize that we need more than just food and drink. Even when the fridge is full and our old age is provided for, we may still feel that we are lacking what truly matters. Human beings need recognition, love, and community. We want to know that we are needed and valued. It is precisely here that we often find ourselves in need. We live amidst broken human relationships; the pain within our fractured connections to one another runs deep. Jesus sees all of this, and His heart goes out to us. He wants to give us more than just bread; He wants to give us food that triumphs even over death. For He knows it is not enough merely to eke out an existence here on earth for a time and then vanish into nothingness. We want to know that we have a Father, a God, and a home awaiting us after we have said our farewells here on earth. Yet, within ourselves, we lack the strength and the means to achieve this. We simply cannot manage it—neither believing in this new reality God offers us nor sharing it with others. We lack the strength; we lack the time. In our own congregation,

too, we realize that resources are limited. Where do we find the people to celebrate a feast—one that begins here on earth and extends into eternity?

What are we to say to this? If there isn't enough, do we simply call off the celebration? After all, we have overextended ourselves and lack the means to hold a feast. So, must we uninvite the guests? For we ask: "Where can we get bread in this wilderness?"

No—precisely now, when we are falling short in every way, we do not send the guests home. For now is Jesus' hour. He is the one who steps into our midst, despite our limitations and our lack. Indeed, it is precisely because of our limitations that He has come. Suddenly, we realize that it was all about Jesus the whole time. When people came back then to hear His Word, they wanted to encounter God. And they received a feast! A feast with Jesus! And Jesus gives thanks to God. Amidst all doubts and questions—and precisely at the point where the scarcity was undeniable—Jesus gives thanks to God. His thanksgiving is directed to Someone; He thanks God and prays a very ordinary prayer. Even though He knows that God has given and created everything, He voices it nonetheless: "Thank You, God, that I am here. That You made me. I have realized that You are the One who has bestowed all this upon me." Today we pray: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blest!" So simple, so childlike, and at times—for some—even ridiculous. Especially considering all the shortages we face. And yet, where prayer is offered, we realize that every meal is a feast—a celebration of our God and what He has done for us. It goes further, too: it is a feast among us that fosters community. Just as past generations passed down the art of bread-making to us, we now pass the bread on to our fellow human beings. We share with one another. There is a great mystery in this: we do not keep everything for ourselves but pass it on, discovering in the process that there is enough for everyone. This still happens today when people volunteer, or when they pay their church contributions or make a donation as they leave the church.

Thus, our scarcity turned into a great feast that sufficed for all. Yet this feast—where Jesus gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave it away—is merely a prelude to a far greater banquet. Jesus did the very same thing during His final meal with the twelve disciples: He took the bread, gave thanks, and shared it. "Take and eat. Drink from it, all of you! This is my body; this is my blood." To the human mind, this presents a major stumbling block. Just as the disciples once asked, "Where can we get bread out here in the wilderness?" so, too, do some wonder today: How is it possible that we Christians are still celebrating this same meal—the one Jesus shared with His twelve—after more than two thousand years? Reason asks: Isn't it all a bit ridiculous? How long did Jesus actually sit with His disciples back then... and why must you keep repeating, over two thousand years later, something that was over in a matter of minutes? Can it really make a difference? We see that the power lies within Him. When we eat our seven-grain bread today, we are not eating bread that is thousands of years old, but rather something entirely fresh—nourishment for our bodies here and now. Likewise, the Body and Blood of Jesus that we receive today serve as life-giving food for me in my own state of need today. Need can be an obstacle, yet it is overcome by Jesus himself. He stands in the midst of it all. It is He who gives thanks and distributes the bread. It is He who knows your hardships and understands how to nourish you today. It is He who provides your meal this day.

When the feast took place during the miracle of the loaves, it did not end simply when the eating was done. The leftovers were gathered up—seven baskets full. That signifies more than just a number; the number seven represents perfection. It signifies that the feast was fully sufficient and bestowed an abundance. Then, Jesus sends the people back to their everyday lives—an unpretentious conclusion. The meal provides enough sustenance for the journey ahead; it gives us the strength to have Jesus accompany us into our daily lives.

And now, our Harvest Festival comes to a close. Ours, too, is a true celebration—one that does not unfold without its complications. Yet Jesus is there. He gives thanks, blesses, gives, and shares. And at His table, our lives are transformed. Amen.