

All Ate and Were Filled

Matthew 14:13-21

On this Independence Day, we Americans have great reason to be confident. Yes, there are those who want to discredit everything our Founding Fathers stood for. With all the self-confidence of the self-righteous, many people want to dismiss all of them as just a bunch of white male slaveholders who didn't really believe any of what they wrote in the Declaration of Independence.

But the fact is that the very values of freedom and liberty that the "woke" crowd holds so dear first gained political expression in the radical experiment in self-government that began in July of 1776. And the fact is that, however imperfect our system of government might have been at its inception, participation in American democracy has gradually but steadily increased. First, men were allowed to vote regardless of their wealth. Then, race-based slavery was outlawed. Then women were welcomed to the ballot box. Finally, 100 years after the slaves were freed, the promise of the 15th Amendment was confirmed as the Civil Rights Movement claimed the right to vote for all Americans, regardless of their ethnic group.

Yes, on this Independence Day we Americans have great reason to be confident, to be proud of our ancestors and their achievements. And we American Presbyterians have even greater reason for pride – after all, it was our system of elected representatives serving in graded church courts that formed the model for all American government. And regardless of our denominational affiliation, don't all of us American Christians tend to take pride in our hard work or our social respectability, or in our church attendance, or in our financial contributions to various forms of Christian ministry? Sometimes, if we're honest, we can find ourselves looking down on those who, for whatever reason, find themselves enslaved to drugs or sex or money in much the same way as the self-righteous "woke" folk look down on the Founding Fathers for their unenlightened ideas about ethnicity.

But it was into the same kind of self-confidence that Jesus first spoke to His disciples in verse 16 – "Give ye them to eat." For this was frankly an impossible task for them. After all, verse 21 makes clear that the crowd that surrounded Jesus consisted of 5000 families. And yet when the disciples inventoried the food that was available, they could only find five loaves and a couple of fish. That wouldn't even be enough for the 12 disciples. So how could Jesus possibly expect them to feed a crowd of thousands with such meager fare? How could Jesus have such unrealistic expectations of His followers?

Well, that's often our reaction to Jesus' commandments, isn't it? For into our smug spiritual self-confidence, Jesus tells us things like, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Let the one who has struck you on one cheek strike you on the other. Give to everyone that asks of you. Lend, expecting nothing in return. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me."

Now, we Bible-believing Presbyterians know good and well that this is what God expects of us. But do we really think any of these things are really possible in the real world? Do we imagine we are any more able to do these things than the disciples were able to feed 5000 families with five loaves?

And what about all those difficult circumstances and crises in our lives? How, for example, do you get through to someone who persists in behavior that you know is destroying him? How do you deal with chronic illness in yourself or your loved ones? What do you do when your loved one just walks away from you? What do you do when the prognosis is terminal?

Or what do you do with those stubborn feelings and habits within your own heart, your own mind? How do you deal with emotions that rage out of control? How do you conquer fear when the world really is an increasingly scary place? How do you deal with grief when loved ones are no longer there? How do you overcome frustration in the face of continuous disappointment? How do you defeat despair in the absence of hope?

No, it just wouldn't do for the disciples to go on thinking that they were hot stuff, or even that they were somehow capable to deal with the ordinary challenges of everyday life. And it won't do for us, either. Oh, we can

put on our church face and pretend that everything's fine, that we've got everything under control. But that's not true. That's not honest. That's no way to approach the Lord's table.

Instead, just as the disciples did, we must come to Jesus in faith. For just as surely as Jesus punctured the disciples' self-confidence by giving them an impossible assignment, He also demanded that they have complete confidence in Him.

For look at what Jesus told the crowd to do, to sit down in groups on the grass. At the same time, He didn't tell the disciples what was going to happen. Instead, He put them in the awkward situation of going around in a great crowd, telling everyone to sit down to dinner, all the while being certain that they had no food to distribute. Jesus thus not only confronted His disciples with their own inability to serve the crowd. He also forced them to trust Him to meet their needs.

In the same way, we must not only give up our self-confidence as we come to the Lord's Table. We must not only come confessing our sins, and admitting our inability to live according to God's standards. We must also place our faith in God's power. We must trust Him to do what we cannot do. We must rely on Him to do the impossible – to make us strong and clean and whole. We must come, viewing this not as an empty ritual, but bringing with us the expectation that our lives will be truly changed by communion, by contact with Christ. We must come to the table in faith.

Oh, but there's one more lesson the disciples had to learn. Notice that as Jesus began to do the miracle of multiplying the loaves, verse 19 tells us that Jesus gave the food to the disciples to set before the multitude. Now, I don't know how long it took for 12 guys to serve 5000 families, but it couldn't have been a quick process – it may have been well after dark before they themselves got something to eat. In other words, the disciples not only had to abandon their self-confidence and embrace their own weakness. They not only had to learn to trust Christ. They also had to learn to put others first.

It is in this same manner that we must approach the Lord's Table. For here we not only commune with the One whose strength overcomes our weakness and whose holiness cancels out our sin. Here we also come into contact with all the other saints throughout time and space, however inconsistent their own discipleship may have been. As we take of the one loaf and drink of the one cup, we are reminded that we are all part of the body of Christ, as surely connected to one another as our hand is to our arm or as our foot is to our leg.

And so it is vital to our own spiritual health, as well as to the health of this congregation, that we come to the Lord's table in a spirit of reconciliation, of putting others first. As we enjoy the reality of Christ's forgiving presence, it is all the more urgent that we forgive others. As we rejoice in the fact that, through the sacrifice of the Son, the Father's wrath is removed from us, so we should also let go of whatever anger or resentment or hurt feelings separate us from one another.

But how can we do this? How can we come in weakness, honestly confessing our own inability and sin without falling into despair? How can we come in faith, when we don't see the answers to our problems, and when temptation and sin are so very present to us? How can we come in love, putting others first when our own needs are so urgent and when others have hurt us so deeply?

Look again at the central teaching of this passage. For if we learn nothing else here, we should learn this: Christ can do the impossible. Christ can supply all our needs. Christ can give us more than we could ever ask for or imagine.

For what did Jesus do with five dinner rolls and two sardines? He fed 5000 men, not counting the women and children. And this isn't a miracle of division, in which everyone got a crumb and was satisfied. This is a miracle of multiplication, in which everyone ate their fill. For verse 20 tells us that the amount of the leftovers – a whole basket for each of the disciples – was greater than what Jesus had started with – one little boy's lunch.

Well, what about us? Our God is no less gracious, no less merciful, no less generous to us, is He? For at this table, at Christ's table, Jesus provides us much more than a meal. Here, Jesus offers Himself to us, nothing more and nothing less.

So, if you are like the disciples at the beginning of this story, if you are confident in yourself, if you are trusting in your own goodness to save you, if you can't bring yourself to admit that you are a sinner in need of a savior, this meal is not for you.

No, this table is for those who are tired of trusting in themselves and want to trust in Jesus. This table is for all baptized believers, no matter what denomination you may belong to. This is the Lord's Table, and it is for all who have made a public profession of faith in Christ.

Christian, are you weary? Are you tired of dealing with your own problems, or with the problems of others? Are you tired of trying to untie the knots of hopelessly tangled lives and increasingly desperate situations? Come to the one who promises rest. He will never turn you away.

Christian, are you burdened with guilt, tired of struggling with sin that seems to control you? Are you tired of making promises that you just can't keep? Are you tired of trying to meet God's standards in your own strength? Come to the One who washes you clean with His own blood.

Christian, are you hungry, longing for fulfillment and meaning? Come to the One Who said, "I am the bread of life: he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst; him who comes to me I will not cast out."

The one for whom God is not enough asks too much. Come to the One Who offers Himself to a sinful world through His cross and empty tomb. Come to the One Who, in Himself, will satisfy all your needs. Come to Jesus. Come to the table.