

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on August 2, 2020 (Proper 13A)**

There are so many ways to read and hear the story of the feeding of the 5,000. It's one of those well-known Bible stories that we've all heard many, many times. From Sunday School lessons to Bible studies to countless sermons over the years. But beyond the basic plot line of feeding a bunch of people with five loaves and two fish, beyond the mere miraculous, it is a narrative teeming with richly layered meaning and metaphor.

Depending on your personal or communal situation, this story lands in different ways each time you hear it. Well, all Bible stories do that, but somehow it's the familiar ones that tend to take us by surprise. The feeding of the 5,000 is a sign of Jesus divinity, of course, as all miracles are. There's a supernatural, he-did-what-now quality to the account. One that instills a sense of wonder and awe.

Sometimes the passage inspires us to focus on abundance rather than scarcity in all facets of our lives. It can encourage a profound generosity of spirit. At other times we hear it and are challenged and convicted and compelled to feed the hungry. It draws on the deep well of compassion that resides at the depths of our souls.

And this story is also often viewed through the lens of the Eucharist, as a precursor of sorts to the Last Supper. And, I've got to say, as I've spent time with this passage this week. That's pretty much all I'm hearing right now: echoes of the Eucharist. Because, I miss communion. I miss everything about it!

I miss the altar guild reverently placing the chalice and paten on the altar. I miss young acolytes struggling to light those tall candles. I miss our Verger racing around before the service making sure we have enough wine and wafers to feed everybody. I miss saying a quiet prayer as the server ritually washes my hands before the Great Thanksgiving. I miss consecrating the elements at the altar and looking out and seeing all of your faces. I miss receiving the bread and the wine. I miss offering the gifts of God for the people of God. I miss seeing all of your outstretched hands at the communion rail. I miss nourishing you with the body of Christ and the cup of salvation. I miss the very real presence of Jesus in my own life that only comes through the reception of the Eucharist.

And I know I'm not alone in this yearning. We all feel this heartache to different degrees and in different ways and at different moments. And here's where I think we can all well relate to the large crowd that had gathered in pursuit of Jesus. They may not have known exactly what they were seeking. But their hearts were burning for communion with Jesus. Not in the sacramental sense, of course, but they so yearned to be in the healing and compassionate and loving presence of the divine. And that is what Jesus offered to them. Beyond filling their bellies, he filled their souls with God's love. And when we reach out our hands to receive the Eucharist, we too are yearning to fill our souls with the God of love. The God of peace. The God of compassion. The God of forgiveness. And the very tangible sign of this love, a sign that we can literally taste and see through the bread and wine of the Eucharist is what we miss. That's what I miss.

You know, there are two seasons of the church year that, I think, speak particularly to this moment. Advent is a period of spiritual waiting. And Lent is a period of spiritual fasting. When it comes to communion, we are both waiting and fasting. It is Advent. And it is Lent. And it is hard. Especially in a time of isolation, we so desperately crave spiritual connection and renewal — the very things that we so lovingly receive in the Eucharist.

But here's what gives me hope during this time of Eucharistic exile: we are all in this together. We are waiting and fasting as a community. Not because it's easy or out of some misconstrued sense of Eucharistic martyrdom. But because we love one another. We refrain from the sacramental meal because we are a community of faith built on love. And this meal remains at the heart of our common life, even while we wait and fast. For however long it will take to return to this altar.

Just before I was ordained a priest some 20 years ago, my rector took me into his office to talk about priesthood and what it means and I've never forgotten one of the things he told me. He said, "Tim, being a priest and being empowered to celebrate the sacred mysteries of the Eucharist is like having a superpower that only works in the presence of others."

In other words, I can't celebrate communion by myself. I need all of you. A priest needs the gathered community. We need one another to fully be the church both here in this building and out in the world. And in the meantime we wait. And we fast. And we serve God. And we love one another.

I find it fascinating that when it came time to feed the crowd, Jesus does exactly what he would do at the Last Supper and what the priest does at the altar. At least when it comes to the action involved. The four-fold structure of the Eucharist is all there. Take, bless, break, give. That's what happens. Jesus takes the loaves, he blesses them, he breaks them, and he gives them to the people. Which is why we often see this story as foreshadowing the institution of the Eucharist in that Upper Room in Jerusalem on the night before he died for us. And which is why missing communion has been particularly on my mind this week.

But I will say that this time has, for me, also expanded the notion of communion. In the church, communion is considered a sacrament. As anyone going through Confirmation Class will be able to tell you, the definition of a sacrament is "An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." In the eucharist, the outward and visible sign is bread and wine. In baptism the outward and visible sign is water.

We may not be able to receive that outward and visible sign of the sacrament right now, but our gatherings are absolutely and unequivocally sacramental. There is an inward and spiritual grace that occurs when we log on and join together to become the extended community that is St. John's. All of us are engaged in a sacramental act this very morning, even if we continue to wait and fast when it comes to the sacrament itself.

My friends in Christ, I so look forward to that day when we will once again partake in the mystic sweet communion that stands at the very heart of our faith. We will get to that mountaintop. But in the meantime, please know that there is no other community with which I would rather wait and fast than the one that is gathered here right now. Your patience and forbearance and faithfulness continues to inspire me each and every day.