

# “A MATTER OF SURVIVAL”

Matthew 14:13-21

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

August 6, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 14, verses 13 through 21. It is on page 692 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus gives a physical gift of survival that looks forward to a greater spiritual gift of survival. Please stand as you are able for the gospel lesson. From Matthew 14, we begin reading at verse 13.

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

<sup>14</sup> When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. <sup>15</sup> Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” <sup>16</sup> But Jesus said, “**They need not go away; you give them something to eat.**” <sup>17</sup> They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” <sup>18</sup> And he said, “**Bring them here to me.**” <sup>19</sup> Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and 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. <sup>20</sup> And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. <sup>21</sup> And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*  
You may be seated.

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What are three or four things you can't live without? What do you really need? And I don't mean the things you *feel* like you can't live without. If you're like me, you get up in the morning and think, *I need coffee now*. Or you might say something like, “I don't know how I could ever live without ... Pinterest.” But I mean the absolute essentials of survival. What do you really need?

The basic needs of human survival don't really involve smartphones or other luxuries. Instead, our basic bodily needs include things like food, water, and shelter. And if we live somewhere cold, like North Dakota, we should include heat, either as a part of shelter or as a fourth category on its own.

But we commonly take these things for granted, because we live in a highly developed part of the world where—at least for most people—these things are a given. But what if we lost access to even one of them? What if the agricultural economy just collapsed, and all the restaurants and grocery stores closed? What if there was nowhere to buy food and we all had to figure it out for ourselves? What would we do? How many of us would just die? Something as simple as a loaf of bread would become a treasure. A crisis like that would make us think

## “A MATTER OF SURVIVAL” (Matthew 14:13-21)

about the necessities of survival, and we would probably wish we had thought about them sooner.

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Now what about our spiritual life? What do we need to survive as Christians? We know from Scripture, as well as from personal experience, that faith does not always last. We all know people who were baptized into Christ. At one point in their lives, they confessed Jesus as the Son of God and the Christ who suffered for sins and was raised from the dead. But, for whatever reason, they no longer believe. Maybe they came to think the historical claims of Christianity just aren't true—like Jesus rising from the dead. But more often, it seems to be something else. Maybe they don't like the Law of God. They think the rules are too restrictive. Or maybe they just don't care. They lose interest. They don't see the point of all this religious stuff.

It happens. Sometimes faith dies. And it grieves us, as it should. But it also serves as a sobering reminder that it could happen to anyone. So what do we need in order to survive as Christians?

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In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus gave this massive crowd what their bodies needed for the evening. And this was a marvelous gift. But the miracle wasn't merely about bread and fish. There's something more—something deeper—that Jesus is teaching us.

The feeding of the five thousand is probably one of the most well-known miracles of Jesus. It's mentioned in all four of the gospels. And apart from the events of holy week, there are very few events that make it into all four. So the fact that this miracle is recorded in all four should emphasize its significance. It's even a miracle Jesus repeats. Both Matthew and Mark record the feeding of the four thousand as well. There are some different themes that come through in the feeding of the four thousand, but we'll focus on the feeding of the five thousand today.

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The basic thing this miracle does is reveal who Jesus is and what he does. We learn, simply by reading the text, that Jesus is really, really powerful. He can do cool stuff like heal sick people and multiply a small amount of food into a massive feast.

We also learn that he is compassionate. We learn, simply by reading the text, that Jesus' compassion moves him to heal the sick and then feed the entire crowd. But there's still more to it than what's on the surface.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record it in rather simple detail. For the most part, they just tell us the facts of what happened. But John, on the other hand, tells us more of what the miracle *means*. Actually, he records Jesus' own words when he tells us what it means. So for your homework this week you can go home and read John, chapter 6. Then you can check my work and make sure I interpret the miracle correctly. And *The Gospel of John* often does this. There's more theological commentary to it.

But the other gospel writers—like Matthew in this case—have a slightly different way of helping us interpret events. Often times, they leave us little clues in the text. They tell the story in just the right way to enable us to make certain connections. And there are a few of those in this text. I'll point them out as we go along.

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## “A MATTER OF SURVIVAL” (Matthew 14:13-21)

The text starts with Jesus withdrawing from the people. He had been teaching and performing miracles in the region of Galilee in northern Israel. But when Jesus learned that King Herod had killed John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew from the towns and went to a desolate place.

And this word “desolate” is the first little clue that helps us understand the meaning. It comes up twice. Matthew tells us it is a desolate place (14:13), and he also records it when the disciples go to Jesus and say, “This is a desolate place” (14:15). It sounds kind of redundant, but that’s the point. We’re supposed to notice this word.

It’s the same word used to describe the desert or the wilderness the Israelites wandered in for forty years after they left Egypt and before they entered the Promised Land. And there are a few other things in the text that remind us of the wilderness journey. There is, of course, the miraculous provision of bread. Six days a week, for most of those forty years, God caused manna—this bread from heaven—to miraculously appear on the ground every morning.

So we learn from this that Jesus is the same God who fed his people then, and he has come to feed them again.

And Matthew gives a few other clues as well, such as the people following Jesus on foot from the towns, just as the Israelites wandered on foot for their entire time in the wilderness, and perhaps also the twelve baskets of leftovers at the end—corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Matthew intends for us to notice these connections, so we might recognize that Jesus is the very God who fed the Israelites in the wilderness, and he has come to feed his people once again.

The bread he gave to the Israelites in the wilderness was a matter of survival. Life and death were on the line. And the same thing is true now. The bread Jesus gives is a matter of survival. Life and death are on the line—and not just in the feeding of the five thousand—but even now.

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So in this historical account, the disciples notice a logistical problem. The people are apparently captivated by Jesus; they just can’t pull away from him. They didn’t bring any food to eat, and they’re staying out in the wilderness longer than they reasonably should, but they don’t seem to have the common sense to go away and buy food. They’re kind of like those video gamers who get so engrossed in the game they forget to eat and drink. Pretty soon this is going to turn into a serious problem.

So the disciples tell Jesus he should get rid of them—you know, for their own good. They say, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves” (14:15). But Jesus doesn’t think that is necessary. And he says something that probably made the disciples think he wasn’t very good at math. He says, **“They need not go away; you give them something to eat”** (14:16).

Uh ... yeah ... five thousand men, plus women and children. We’re looking at a crowd of maybe ten to twenty thousand people here. So the disciples say, “We have only five loaves here and two fish” (14:18). Divide that up among several thousand people and the *lucky* ones will get a crumb. Free smells for the rest. If I were among the Twelve, I would be a bit skeptical.

But credit the disciples with obedience. When Jesus told them to bring the five loaves and two fish to him, they did it.

Then Jesus ordered everyone to sit down on the grass. This, by the way, was the posture for eating in the ancient world. Jesus called them to dinner, even though there wasn’t enough

“A MATTER OF SURVIVAL” (Matthew 14:13-21)

food. This would be like calling your kids to the dinner table when your cupboards are empty. If you can't fulfill their expectation, it's just cruel. But Jesus calls them to dinner, and he feeds them all. “They all ate and were satisfied” (14:20). And then the math didn't really work out in the end when they had twelve baskets of leftovers.

So what happened? “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” (14:19).

And this is kind of neat—even a bit clever. Did you notice what the disciples did? They did exactly what Jesus told them to do in the first place. They gave the crowds something to eat.

But what's far more important than what the disciples did, is what Jesus did. And I want you to pay close attention to this. Can you think of any other time when Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples?

It comes about twelve chapters later in Matthew 26 as Jesus is celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples one last time. It was the evening before his crucifixion. And listen to this: “Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body’ ” (26:26). It's four identical verbs: *took*, *blessed*, *broke*, and *gave*.

And this is no coincidence. As Matthew writes both of these accounts, he intends for us to notice the connection. So what's the connection? It's not like the feeding of the five thousand was really the Lord's Supper in disguise. Jesus didn't consecrate the bread as his body. And there was no wine. The physical bread was just bread—nothing more and nothing less.

But the miracle itself was a sign. It teaches us who Jesus is and what he has given to us to sustain our spiritual life.

So we have these two connections to other events in Scripture: the first being God's miraculous provision of bread to sustain the Israelites during their wilderness journey until they reached the Promised Land. And the second being the institution of the Lord's Supper, where Jesus gives us his very own body and blood to sustain our faith during this wilderness journey until we reach our eternal Promised Land.

The feeding of the five thousand looks back to the Israelites' time in the wilderness, and it looks forward to the institution of the Lord's Supper. And by doing this, it connects these two events. It teaches us who exactly Jesus is and what he has given to sustain our spiritual life.

Jesus is the eternal God. He is the same God who fed the Israelites in the wilderness. And he feeds us now with his crucified and risen body and blood. This is an ongoing gift Jesus has given to sustain us in the faith. And here's the point: this meal is soul-sustaining food. It's a matter of survival.

And it sustains us because it is what Jesus says it is. It is his body and blood. Think about this. If this meal isn't really what Jesus says it is, then the whole thing is pointless. If the bread and wine merely *represent* Jesus' body and blood, they would be of no value to us. It would be like eating a picture of a delicious breakfast and expecting it to get you through the day. You might get a little fiber from the paper, but that's about it.

A mere representation of Jesus is of no substantial value. You see, it's not the idea of Jesus that sustains us in the faith. It is Jesus himself. And this is a matter of survival.

And this is why our church places such a strong emphasis on the means of grace—that is the Word of God and the Sacraments—because through the Word—and remember, Jesus is the

“A MATTER OF SURVIVAL” (Matthew 14:13-21)

Word made flesh (John 1:14). Through the Word and the Sacraments, we actually receive Jesus. Jesus comes to us through these things. This is how he feeds and preserves our faith. It’s a matter of survival. The food, water, and shelter of our spiritual life are the Word and Sacraments, because these are the things that deliver Jesus to us. And Jesus is the one who preserves us in the faith.

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We get this notion sometimes as Christians that remaining in the faith is our responsibility. We think, *God got me started, but it’s up to me to finish strong*. We think, as a matter of survival, we need to learn how to do good works and how to love God through certain disciplines. And these things are good. Good works, for example, are really, really good, and we should do lots of them. But they do not preserve us in the faith. They do not cause us to grow as Christians. They do not strengthen us. The benefit of good works is not for the one doing them. Nor is the benefit for God, even though he is the one who commands them. The benefit is for our neighbors—the people we do the good works for—and that should be more than enough reason to do lots and lots of good works.

But we deceive ourselves if we think they make us better Christians. We think that we must be really good if we do lots of good things. So we try to do good works in order to make ourselves good, and if we can become good enough, then we will be strong enough to preserve ourselves in the faith. But that’s not how it works. Our faith—from beginning to end and everything in between—it’s all Jesus.

When it comes to our physical lives, we confess—as Scripture teaches us—that God is truly the one who gives us everything we need for this bodily life. Food, water, and shelter and everything else are his gifts to us.

And if this is true for our physical lives, how much more for our spiritual lives. It is God who gives us the gifts that preserve us in the faith. And that is why we come here. We come to receive Jesus. It’s a matter of survival.

Jesus is here for you. The same Jesus who was crucified for your sins and was raised for your justification—here he gives to you his holy body and blood to preserve you in the faith unto eternal life.

As we journey through this wilderness of life, with all its pains and challenges, God grants the food that will sustain our faith until we reach our eternal Promised Land. So come, and eat, and drink, and live. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.