

# DIVINE SERVICE

Matthew 14:13-21

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

August 6, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 14, verses 13 through 21. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 14, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

<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.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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This morning I'm going to start a little sermon series that I've been thinking about for quite a while, probably at least a year or more. It's going to be a series on worship. So it might seem a little different than what we usually do. We're actually going to be talking about what we do during this time instead of just doing it. But I think this will be beneficial for us. My hope is that it will help us to better understand and appreciate what happens here during this time.

So this week we will take a general look at worship: *what is it?* Then next week we will focus more specifically on the Lord's Supper. You'll understand then why we're doing that next week and not this week. And I'd like to emphasize the importance of being here next week. If you can't be here next week, please watch it, listen to it, or read it online. We'll be talking about a few things that every member should be aware of. And I will give some time following worship for a question and answer time in the fellowship hall. It will be a little bit like our adult Sunday school time. That will be next week. And then, for a week or two after that, I want to walk through the other parts of the service and point out the meaning in each part. We'll also talk about a few things that I wanted to put in this sermon, but they didn't fit. This week is more of an introduction. We will lay the foundation for the rest of our conversation about worship.

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I've been thinking about this series for quite some time. And as I thought about when to start, I was looking for a good passage to teach the doctrine of worship. And I realized that nearly every passage in the Bible, and especially in the gospels, is a good passage to teach about

worship. That is because worship is really about what God does when we come into his presence. So, over and over again in the gospels, we see what Jesus does for the people in his presence. We see it in this passage about Jesus feeding the five thousand. He heals them, teaches them, and feeds them. And whenever we gather in Jesus' name, the focus is still on what Jesus does for us, not just what he did do two thousand years ago, but what he continues to do for us.

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Now, when we talk about worship, you might think about musical style. For the past fifty years, maybe longer, congregations, especially in America, have engaged in what's called the "Worship Wars." That's not a good name for it. They're really debates. And debates are good. When you call it a "war," it shames people in order to shut down the conversation. And that's bad. But debates are good; that's how good ideas triumph over bad ones. The so-called "Worship Wars" have mostly been about musical style. Within congregations, people have fought about whether to keep the old hymns and their organs or progress to contemporary songs led by worship teams. Those are the proverbial "battle lines." And, as far as I can tell, the debate has been framed as a matter of musical preference. But those who have framed the debate that way are either disingenuous or, hopefully, just ignorant of the underlying disagreement. Before we even talk about musical styles, we first need to answer the question, *What is worship?* It's really a theological matter.

In my searching and talking with people from different traditions, I have found three basic definitions. We can call them the Lutheran view, the Reformed view, and the charismatic view.

I'll start, very briefly, with the Lutheran definition. In our doctrine, worship is about God serving us with his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. The salvation Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection is distributed to us in the Word and the Sacraments. That's what we believe is happening. So the basic distinction in Lutheran worship is that God serves us.

Besides this, I have found two other definitions that are much more common. First: *Worship is giving glory to God. It's about praising God for who he is and what he does.* This is the view you will find among many Christians who come from a Reformed or Calvinist background. This definition is inherent to their theology. For example, the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is one of their most popular confessional documents, asks, "What is the chief end of man?" Or a simpler way to ask the question is, "Why did God create man?" Their answer is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Lutherans would answer differently. We would say that man's chief end is to receive God's love. And then a secondary end would be to love God and love our neighbors by keeping God's commandments. That's quite a bit different from when our Reformed friends say, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." You can see how this leads to their definition of worship. If the purpose of man's existence is to glorify God, then, of course, the purpose of worship should be to glorify God. Hence, everything should be geared toward praising God. The music should be all praise, and the goal of the preaching and teaching should be to evoke praise in our hearts.

The second common definition is this: *Worship is about experiencing the presence of God.* This definition, as far as I can tell, comes from the charismatic side of America Christianity. In Pentecostal or charismatic doctrine, the Holy Spirit comes in special or new ways, and he stirs our hearts. To them, the Holy Spirit makes his presence known through our feelings. So charismatic worship, typically, has a lot to do with our emotions. The music is highly emotive. So are the lyrics. It can be very exciting, very joyful, or even romantic. This definition of worship has probably become the dominant one in America today. But it doesn't really exclude the Reformed view. A lot of churches function a little bit with both views.

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So you might think, *Well pastor, maybe all three of these definitions are right. Maybe all three of them contribute to a bigger view of worship.* And that's partly true. I don't know that any of these views completely exclude the others. But it's a matter of primacy. What is most important? How do we put all of this in its proper place?

Let's compare the Lutheran view with the Reformed view. We should and do praise God. But in Lutheran worship, praise is not the first order of business. Praise is the appropriate response to God's loving service, so it has a necessary place. But God's loving service is the first and primary order of business. The basic difference between our Lutheran view of worship and the Reformed view is the direction of service. In the Reformed view, the arrow points up. That is, worship is something we do for God. In the Lutheran view, the arrow points down, from heaven to earth. Worship is about what God does for us.

This is a little bit confusing, simply because of the word "worship." The word is basically synonymous with "praise." It comes from the old English word "worth-ship." It means to ascribe worth to something. So we might think, *Hey, it's called "worship," so that's what we should do.* But the reason we all use the word "worship" is simply because English became the common language in the United States, and that's the word English-speaking people used for the Sunday morning church thing. If German had become the common language, we would probably all call it "Gottestienst," which means "God's service." Or it's usually translated into English as "Divine Service." Or if we spoke Greek, like the New Testament was written in, we would probably call it "λειτουργία," from which we get our English word "liturgy." Like the German word, it means "service." And we especially mean the service that God gives to us. And so, really, the most appropriate title for this event we are having right now is "Divine Service." That's the technical title we use for a service that includes the Lord's Supper. It's a service of Word and Sacrament. That's what we're doing today. And then for a service that does not include the Lord's Supper, like next Sunday, we call it a "Service of the Word." So "Divine Service" is the whole package, Word and Sacrament, while "Service of the Word" is just the one part of it.

Within these services we do return praise and thanksgiving to God. I mean, it would be pretty cold of us not to. But the key distinction between Lutheran worship and Reformed worship is which service is primary. Is it about the praise we render to God? Or is it about the service God renders to us? In Reformed worship, praise of God is primary. And this affects, not just the music, but every aspect of worship. But for Lutherans, it's about the service God renders to us.

Now let's compare the Lutheran view with the charismatic view. The charismatic view is all about the presence of God. And we actually agree. God is present. If he weren't, our worship would be very different. But for charismatic Christians, the Holy Spirit's presence is primary, while we confess the presence of the entire Trinity, and especially the Son, Jesus Christ.

The big difference is that, generally speaking, in charismatic worship, the presence of God is felt, while in Lutheran worship, the presence of God is proclaimed. It's objective instead of subjective. I don't want to say that this is true for all charismatic Christians, because I am sure it is not, but charismatic worship has come to be characterized by a feeling of intimacy. And this view of worship has spilled well beyond charismatic churches. Most evangelical churches now function with this as their primary definition of worship. And I have heard several worship leaders say that their job is to make people experience the presence of God. It's very mystical.

Now, we do feel things. God is an emotional being, and he created our emotions. It is good and right for our emotions to be affected by the presence of God. Again, it would be cold of us not to. But the emphasis in Lutheran worship is that God is present, whether or not we feel him. And the Holy Spirit is working in us whether or not we feel an intimate connection to him.

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We believe that Jesus is present because, first of all, it is simply his nature to be present wherever the Word of God is. Remember what John said in the first chapter of his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14). He’s talking about Jesus. He is the eternal Word, through whom the Father created all things. And he has become the Word made flesh. Wherever the Word of God is, Jesus is there. It’s simply his nature.

We also believe that Jesus is present because of his promises. In Matthew 18:20 he says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” And in Matthew 28:20, after Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize and teach, he promised, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” So Jesus promises to be with us, especially in connection with the Word and the Sacraments.

And we have Jesus’ presence in the Lord’s Supper. We believe this to be true, even bodily, because he said when he instituted it, “This is my body” and “This is my blood” (Matt. 26:26, 28). Jesus is present.

Now think about this: If Jesus came and stood among us right now, what would happen? Who would serve whom? Would we serve him, or would he serve us? We don’t really have to wonder about this, because we have four gospels filled with historical accounts of what happens when Jesus interacts with people. He serves them. He teaches them. He heals them. He feeds them, like he did in the gospel lesson for today. He raises them from the dead. He forgives their sins. And all of these services are a picture of the eternal salvation we have in Jesus. That’s what I mean when I say that nearly every passage in the Bible, and especially in the gospels, teaches us about worship. They teach us what happens when God interacts with sinful people.

In the gospels, Jesus receives praise. But that’s not the big activity. It’s not like people are just bowing down in homage or singing incessantly. Jesus cleanses a leper. Then the man praises him (Luke 18:11-19). Jesus heals a blind man, and he glorifies God (Luke 18:43). Of course we praise God, but that’s not the big deal with worship. Whenever God is present among his people, he serves us. This might sound backward, or even selfish and narcissistic. It’s not. This is God’s will. Jesus washed his disciples’ feet in order to demonstrate this (John 13). He said, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). He tells a parable about a master who comes home late at night in order to serve his servants (Luke 12:35-40). This seems backward when compared to the way the world functions. In the world, servants serve their masters and subjects serve their rulers. But it’s really the world that is backward. God is right. The person in authority is the servant. And it’s not selfish for us to think of worship this way. If we expected God to serve us the way we want him to serve us, that would be selfish. If we set the terms, that would be narcissistic. But God sets the terms. He serves us the way he knows is best. So it’s not about us being selfish; it’s about him being gracious.

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The feeding of the five thousand is an especially good picture of worship, because, not only is Jesus serving the people, but he’s doing it in a way that is a metaphor for Christian worship. He’s feeding them.

Remember the Exodus. The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, but God led them out through the Red Sea. They became a free nation, belonging only to God. And God led them in the wilderness for forty years before they reached the Promised Land. During that time, God fed them with manna, which was a bread-like thing that miraculously appeared on the ground six days a week.

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When Jesus feeds the five thousand, he reveals that he is the God who led and fed them in the wilderness. And that whole event looks forward to Jesus' greater work of redemption. It's a picture of Jesus leading God's people out of slavery to sin and death and into freedom in the new creation. And all along the way, Jesus feeds his people. So the manna in the wilderness foreshadows an even greater gift: the Word of God. During the Exodus, Moses taught the people that God gave them manna in order to teach them something more important, "That man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut. 8:3).

So Jesus continues to feed us with the Word of God. This is nourishment for our souls. We are still living in the Exodus. That's what this Christian life is. We have been freed from slavery to sin and death, but we have not yet reached the new creation. We're still in the wilderness, so Jesus feeds us with the Word of God. That's really what worship is all about.

In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus "broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds" (14:19). This is a fitting illustration for Christian worship. This is what Christian pastors do. They take the Word of God and distribute it to the people. That's all they do.

Jesus performed the work of salvation. That is, he suffered and died for the sins of the world. He rose from the dead, opening eternal life to all who trust in him. That's the work of salvation. That's like the miracle of turning five loaves and two fish into a meal for five thousand people. All the disciples did was distribute the work of Jesus. And that's all that pastors do. They distribute the salvation Jesus accomplished. They distribute it by proclaiming the Word of God and administering the sacraments. So Christian worship is a feast for our souls where we eat with our ears.

But we also get to use our mouths. In the Lord's Supper, that same Word of God takes on a physical form, because it is, according to Jesus' words, the body and blood of Christ. So we also eat the Word with our mouths.

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That's what worship is, and that's why we gather. We come because the Gospel is true. Jesus died and rose again. And the benefits of this are infinite. God delivers forgiveness, life, and salvation to us through his Word and Sacraments. This is the food that sustains us during our Exodus life. 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.