

August 2nd, 2020

Matthew 14:13-21

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“All Ate and Were Filled ”

I grew up in Russia and left the country when I was 20. And every time I go back to visit my family, there is always a small feast that is awaiting me usually in my mom's home consisted of some of my favorites of my mom's cooking: mom's schi - it is like borsch but without beets, pirozhki - it is like individual baked pie with variety of filling - my favorite is potatoes and cabbage, and a usual Russian salad - and no, this salad does not have lettuce, it has tomatoes and cucumbers. So my brother or my dad usually picks me up from the airport and usually we go to my mom's home. My parents are divorced. But we go to be together, and eat, and catch up on our lives from my last visit, year or two before.

So the last time when I visited my family was in May of 2019. Depending on the air ticket, the trip usually takes from 20-24 hours with 3-4 flights involved. But that last trip was especially long. Several of my flights were late and when I flew into Moscow, the luggage service took an incredible amount of time and I got late to my last flight to Samara. I was exhausted and disappointed. It was already 10pm. When I got to the ticket stand, they said there was a middle of the night flight that would get me to my hometown around 5am. I got the ticket and after a few hours at the airport, I finally got on the plane and landed in Samara. To my surprise, both my brother and my dad were waiting for me at the airport. My brother had to pick up my dad on his way because my dad was just too excited to see me. So on our way back we had to drop my dad off at his home. When we stopped by his apartment building, my dad got out of the car and out of his backpack he took out a plastic bag. In the plastic bag he had cucumbers and tomatoes. I said, “What is this?” He said, “That is for the salad.” My brother and I laughed. “It is 5am in the morning. You thought that we would get together and eat now?!” We parted and we saw each other later that day of course for a feast and good conversations. My dad had brought a guitar and we sang songs. I laughed about this story with my husband and some friends. I could not believe my dad brought tomatoes and cucumbers to the airport!

But later as I thought more and more about it, I realized why my dad came to the airport that morning. He did not only want to see me but he did not want to be excluded from that important meal that usually happens when I come back home to visit. It does not matter what time of the day it was he was prepared and wanted to be a part of the meal and even brought the ingredients for the salad to share with the family. He wanted to be included.

Friends, this very familiar Gospel story of the feeding of 5000 that Larry read for us from Matthew's Gospel, is a story of inclusion, a story of gathering people in, bringing people into the presence, the love, and compassion of God. It was the mission and ministry of Jesus to bring people in, to welcome them, to let them experience the healing presence of God that Jesus himself represented.

But somehow in the story the disciples missed the memo on that or forgot about it when they decided to send people away into the villages to buy their own food when it got dark. Really! Is this a good solution?! From reading history and some commentaries, we learn that “the world of the first-century Roman Empire was marked by significant inequalities concerning food access. Many people knew food insecurity and struggled on a daily and seasonal basis for adequate food and nutrition. The gap between those with money and power and who enjoyed abundant variety and good quality of food and those who went hungry most of the time was enormous. And most of the population lived around, at, or below subsistence level with inadequate caloric and nutritional intake.”

The disciples were aware of it and it was obvious that most people in the crowd was not the people who had a lot of money. And isn't striking that the story of the feeding happens in the desert. It of course reminds us of the Israelites wandering in the desert hungry asking God for food. But it also reminds us of food deserts in our country and our own state. Food deserts are the areas are limited in the number of stores that provide “healthy, fresh and affordable foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables. The U.S. Department of Agriculture classifies this in terms of distance and income. In rural areas, food deserts exist where grocery stores are more than 10 miles away. Here in Columbus Ohio we have several food deserts that are mostly on the Eastside and the South of the city. Covid-19 wrecked havoc in the food distributions systems and became “the final straw for millions of people already struggling with the impacts of conflict, climate change, inequality and a broken food system that has impoverished millions of food producers and workers.” We heard the reports that especially Latin America is forseeing food crisis now. Our own People in Need Food Pantry here in Delaware reports much more numbers of people needing food as we know thousands even millions of people lost their income due to the pandemic and now lost their unemployment benefits.

As I was thinking about all of this, the situation in Rome and our situation, I just kept getting mad at the disciples! How could they send those people away! But thank God they asked Jesus what to do. And Jesus, his heart full of compassion for the crowd from the very beginning of the story. Remember when he brought them in to heal them because he had compassion for them. So Jesus says to the disciples “You do not need to send them away!” We hear compassion again and a wish not to exclude people in whatever Jesus was thinking of doing next. “You give them food to eat!” And here Jesus includes the disciples into his mission and then we all know what happens. They find some bread and two fish. Then he orders the disciples to ask the crowd to sit down. I was wondering here if they had to sit six feet apart from each other and wear a mask:)) Jesus takes the food they had, breaks it, blesses it and the disciples distribute the food to all who were gathered there, not only five thousand, but thousands and thousand of people including women and children and still there were twelve baskets of the left over food. A feast of a simple meal with everyone gathered and included into God's presence.

Friends, this is a story of God's vision for human beings to continue to include all into God's table for there is enough for everyone to eat and share and there will still be some food left. What would

happen if we share that vision of God for the world, the vision for abundance, for worth of each person, worth of each person's life and health? What would happen if we continually bring people in, welcome them, share food with them, share God's compassion and love with them? Not only in the church but in our every day lives? What would happen if we knew first ourselves that we are welcomed and we are loved at the table and the abundance of God is ours too?

I know we missed eating together as a church, in our hospitality hours, in our potlucks. I think the last meal we had as a larger church body was Habitat Pancake Supper. But friends, we share a meal every month that reminds us of God's love and welcome for all people, reminds us of our inclusion into God's mission and vision of bringing about abundance and love to all. It is a sacrament of Holy Communion. Despite the pandemic we continue to partake of the Sacrament that deeply reminds us of our belonging to God and to each other. So we will move into the time of our simple meal together.