**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 14: 13-21
August 2, 2020**

 I am going to do something a little bit different today with the sermon than I usually do. I am going to treat the story of the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* a bit more like a bible study. Now, granted, in essence every sermon is a bible study but typically I will hit on one or two central points only to drive them home. Today, with this particular story, I want to provide a broader perspective because this story is not about what you think. You see, the feeding of the five thousand is really not about the feeding of the five thousand. It is so much more than that.

 Before we begin, though, I want to remind you of a couple of things that are important for you to remember. First and foremost, you need to remember this: the bible is all about Jesus. If I haven’t made that clear in my ministry here, let me make it clear now. The bible is not about you and what you must do and it is not about me and what I must do. No, it is about Jesus and what he has done for us. The Bible is where Jesus can be found so that we can hear his words that tell us of God’s marvelous revelation concerning his plan of salvation which finds its complete fulfillment where? In the person and work of Jesus Christ. I have quoted this from Martin Luther before, but he once said that, *“If you took a knife and cut the Bible anywhere, it would bleed Jesus.”* That is a very descriptive way of stating this truth: the whole book from cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation is about Jesus. Even when you read something which seems to have absolutely nothing to do with Jesus, it is still about Jesus. He is the author and perfecter of our faith, he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all things and that includes the Scriptures. So, whenever you read the Scriptures you need to ask yourself these questions, *“How does this relate to Jesus and his plan for saving me?”*  *“How is Jesus the answer to whatever it is that I am reading?”*

That’s the first point*. So w*hat is the second thing you need to know? Well the second thing is absolutely critical. *“Context is king!”* The biggest problem most people have in reading the bible is that they do it out of context. Context is so important because the events we read about in the bible did not happen in isolation and they were not recorded in isolation. No, God, through the inspiration of the authors, arranged them, in context, to make a point. What story precedes the passage you are reading? What story follows? To whom is Jesus talking? His disciples? The Pharisees? Gentiles? To whom is Paul’s letter addressed? From where did he write it? Was he free? Or, was he in prison? All of these questions seek to understand the context. Typically, if you read the text “around” a passage you are struggling with, it will clear things up.

 Now, it is that second point regarding context that helps us with our gospel lesson for today from Matthew. And I say that because with the feeding of the five thousand, it is kind of easy to simply chalk this up to just another one of Jesus’ miracles. Here’s Jesus pulling another rabbit out of his hat! What’s he going to do for his next trick? However, the context surrounding this passage helps us to see that there is so much more to this story than Jesus simply providing a meal for hungry people. What the context helps us to see today is that Jesus came into to this world to establish his reign upon the earth. However, it also shows us just what sort of reign Jesus brings.

 Now, bear with me a bit. Let’s take a look at the larger context of this passage. One of the main themes in Matthew’s gospel is that with the coming of Jesus, the *“reign”* or the *“kingdom”* of heaven was at hand. That’s the message, if recall, that John the Baptist came preaching. That is the initial message that Christ Jesus himself preached after his baptism. However, what sort of *“kingdom”* is it that Jesus brings? Well, throughout the gospel, Jesus goes to great length to show us what kind of kingdom he is ushering in and what kind of king he will be. And, a very effective way for him to do that is to contrast his kingdom to the kingdoms we already know, meaning, the kingdoms of this world. That is what the immediate context shows us.

 Your bulletins, unfortunately, do not have the section just ahead of his reading, but Matthew gives us a hint that he wants us to connect this story with what preceded. Look at the first verse of our reading for today. Matthew records*, “Now when Jesus heard (about the death of John) he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.”*

 In recording this, Matthew wants us to look back and if you do look back to the beginning of this chapter, what you will find is the account of the beheading of John the Baptist. Just to remind you, John the Baptist had been arrested by King Herod. What was John’s offense? Well, he called Herod out on his sin. Herod had married his brother’s wife and John publicly preached against his immorality. The truth was that Herod wanted to kill John outright but he feared the people might rebel against him because they rightfully saw John as a prophet.

 Well, on Herod’s birthday, there was a great party and as Herod and his guests indulged themselves, his stepdaughter danced for him. So pleased was Herod that he promised to give her whatever she asked, even up to half his kingdom. Prompted by her mother, the girl asked for the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter. Although Herod still didn’t want to kill John, he was ultimately more concerned with saving face in front of his guests. He therefore granted her wish. John, whom Jesus himself said there was no one greater in the kingdom of heaven, was beheaded.

Now, you may be asking yourself, *“What in the world does this have to do with the feeding of the five thousand? What possible connection could there be between Herod murdering John and Jesus providing nourishment for the multitudes who sought him?”* Well, by connecting the two stories, Matthew, as I said earlier, is drawing a contrast between the character of the kingdoms of this world and the character of the kingdom of heaven. And what we learn is that there is a marked contrast indeed.

 First, what do you see with Herod’s kingdom of the world? With what principles does he operate? Well, just think of the brief description surrounding the execution of John the Baptist. We see self-indulgence, a lust for power and a total disregard for morality. We see callousness, capriciousness and hedonism. Above all, we see a complete disregard for life as Herod sentences a man to death because a *“dance”* pleased him. All of these marked the reign of Herod and, unfortunately, so many kingdoms of the word. In Herod we have the absolute personification of the old saying, *“Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*

By contrast, we have Jesus, who is the true king of all things and embodies in himself the very kingdom of heaven. And what sort of kingdom does he bring? How will this king rule over his kingdom? Well, look at the text. Matthew tells us that after hearing the news concerning John, he withdrew to a solitary place. He wanted to be alone, to perhaps grieve the death of John, but the crowds followed him. How did he respond? Did this king turn them away? Did he seek his own desires first? No. He saw the crowd, this large crowd not as a pestering mass of humanity but as hurting people in need. Jesus had compassion on them. Jesus’ heart went out to them. He showed compassion in the truest sense of the word which is that he didn’t just feel sorry for them, he suffered with them. Eventually, this king would suffer for them.

 He saw that they were hungry. Did he send them away so that he could feed himself? Was he self-indulgent, taking what little food he and the disciples did have so that he could satisfy his own hunger? No. He took what he had, gave thanks to heaven and multiplied the few fish and loaves so that all may eat and be satisfied in his kingdom.

 Don’t you see that in this feeding of the five thousand a new type of kingdom had dawned upon the horizon of mankind. There is a new ruler, one who reigns not as Herod, but in grace and truth and he has come to earth (he has come to us) to establish his kingdom. The provision of abundant food was one of the prophesied marks and signs that the kingdom of heaven had come. The prophets from long ago wrote this so it would serve as a clue for the people the time of God’s salvation had arrived. It was to be like a flashing light in the darkness that the long awaited kingdom of God had finally come to save mankind from this fallen world.

 Look at what Isaiah says in our Old Testament lesson for today. *“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”* Can you imagine Herod doing this? Can you imagine Herod begging the poor to come to him so that he could care for them? Of course not. However, we don’t have to imagine Jesus doing this because this is what he did. In the feeding of the five thousand we learn that the kingdom of heaven operates with a completely and totally different set of principles than the kingdoms of this world. It is a kingdom that is marked by love, compassion, generosity, concern and grace.

 As I said earlier, Jesus was not just compassionate because he felt sorry for the people. He was compassionate because he knew what their real need was. They needed a Savior. His feeding them was just one step on the way to providing them with complete rescue. They needed someone to rescue them from this sinful world, so clearly demonstrated by Herod, and they needed rescue for their own sin. That is why Jesus came.

 And this is where the feeding of the five thousand touches us today. We need rescue also. We have all, in many and various ways, been touched by sin in our lives. We have been affected by those who have sinned against us. People do stupid things and we are not immune to the hurt that their decision brings. We do stupid things too, however, and we have been affected by living with the consequence of our own sin. Every personal sin with which we struggle and for which we pray so desperately for God to take care of, and yet we so often still continue in them, each of these sins is a painful reminder that we stand in need of Jesus’ compassion.

 The kingdoms of this world will never give this to you. The governments of this world, although necessary, will never be your Savior. Jesus alone is the King who saves and the feeding of the five thousand shows us this. Only the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of grace and by the death and resurrection of Jesus, you and I now live in this gracious kingdom. We live under the gracious reign of Jesus who has come in our flesh to seek and to save the lost. We live under his gracious rule where he asks his disciples to follow him not that they may serve him but that he may serve them. We live in the kingdom of heaven where the throne which our King chose for himself was made of inlaid gold or silver but two pieces of roughhewn wood in the shape of cross. We live in a kingdom where our King reveals his glory through his mission to suffer, to die and to rise again once and for all so that his kingdom might be established forever.

 My dear friends in Christ, if you remember just these two things, the bible is all about Jesus and “context is king,” you will see for yourself that the bible really is a testimony not only of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but a testimony of his grace to you and to me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.