

St. Paul's Anglican Church
4th Sun in Lent; John 6:1 to 14
March 31, 2019

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A long time ago, but not in a galaxy far, far away, God determined to bring about the salvation of his created beings, not through the Jedi Knights of Star Wars, but through the nation of Israel. Along the way, he gave them a set of laws to follow, called commandments. Throughout the history of ancient Israel, they waffled between times of doing their best to obey and serve God, and times of turning their back on Him. At their low point, first the northern portion and later the southern part, called Judah, were taken into captivity by foreign powers.

The ministry of the Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, began just before Judah's total defeat, about 600 years before the birth of Christ. He first prophesied about Judah's destruction followed by God's message that the nations afflicting them would also feel the wrath of God.

Our reading (Ezek. 39:21-29) is found in the last portion of Ezekiel where the prophet gives a clear vision of the future restoration of Israel. God declares they will finally realize **that I am the Lord their God because I sent them into captivity among the heathen, and then gathered them into their own land.** God's holiness and his mercy to Israel will be made known to all the nations of the world.

God leaves them with these words about a future time of peace and restoration: **I will not hide my face any more when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel.** This is a promise of the renewed covenant between God and Israel; He will have a divine presence with them. He poured out his Holy Spirit upon them when He sent his Son, Jesus Christ to walk among them; and He poured out his Spirit on every Christian after our Lord's Resurrection, when He sent the Holy Spirit to live in every

believer's heart. God has a divine presence with his people; and we are his people.

So, this pouring out began with our Savior's ministry on earth, and our gospel reading about the miracle feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1-14), gives us an awesome example of what the Holy Spirit can accomplish. Since the miracle feeding is the Sunday gospel lesson three times each year, I usually wonder, "Okay, what can I possibly preach this time that I have not already said." I do not know if God laughs or gets upset by my lack of faith, but He gives me new insights.

At the time of the gospel reading, Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee and we are told **a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles.** His healing ministry was drawing a crowd; some probably sought healing, and many others simply wanted to witness another miracle.

This sounds spiritually shallow! But consider this, why did we first follow Jesus? It does not matter if we were drawn to Him because of his miracles, or because of his love for people, or we admired his great teaching. And, it does not even matter if we first came to St. Paul's because we heard, "They have great coffee hours after every service!"

It does not matter why we first came to Jesus. What is important is that, through the working of the Holy Spirit, we continue to come to Him because we now know that He is our Savior; and it is through Him alone that we have eternal life.

This is the message behind the question He asked Philip, **Where shall we buy bread so they may eat?** (I wonder if He was also having a little fun with his disciples.) Listen to their rationalization as to why his question is absurd; "200 days wages will not buy enough bread so they can have a little," and "here is a lad with five loaves and two fish, but what good is that?"

Phillip thought feeding 5,000 was impossible. I received this email about impossible; "It's strange how drinking 8 cups of water a day seems impossible, but 8 cups of coffee go down like a chubby kid on a seesaw!"

You and I are Philip! Our human thought process limits our ability to understand the awesome power available to us through faith in Jesus. No matter our position in life, regardless of how long we have served God, He is going to call us to an “impossible” task. He is going to call us to new ministries and challenges. Could Jesus right now be teaching us to rethink “impossible”?

What was his first step? Make these 5000 sit down on this beautiful and plentiful grass! When we face a challenge, take time to “sit on the grass in a pleasant place.” Any place we spend time in fellowship with our Savior is a pleasant place. If He calls us to a task, He will guide us through it; if life puts a huge obstacle in our face, He will guide us, or maybe even carry us through it.

What did He do next? He gave thanks and the bread and fish were distributed to the people. The five thousand ate until they were filled; and there were twelve baskets of food remaining; they had more food after the meal than they did before it.

A few passages after our reading, Jesus proclaims He **is the bread of life**. At Holy Communion, when we prepare to receive Jesus as the bread of life by asking forgiveness of our sins and living in fellowship with Him, He gives us Himself, the bread that leads to eternal life, and we relive the miracle feeding.

We are spiritually fed by our Lord through the sacrament of Holy Communion. No matter how “spirit filled” we may be as we head toward the altar railing, when we leave it, we should feel an overflowing of our Savior’s spiritual strength, power and guidance through the receipt of the bread of life.

Left to our own strength and wisdom, we will not be any more successful in obeying God’s commandments than Israel, or able to grasp the vast potential for service to God than the disciples who could not imagine how Jesus could feed so many with so little. But St. Paul said in the epistle (Gal. 4:21-31), that we are not like the ancient Israelites.

He told the Christians in Galatia to resist the teaching of some Jewish believers, called Judaizers, who were insisting that all Christians meet every requirement of the Jewish Law. He told

them they were not **born after the flesh**, but were **born after the Spirit**. God has poured out his Spirit on every Christian; we are not bound to serve the Law; through Jesus' sacrifice and our faith in Him, we are made free to serve only Him.

Perhaps we can better understand this pouring out of God's Spirit if we consider our life as Christian as a single sun rise. In the example from last week's sermon, we saw that Chuck Colson lived his first 40 plus years in the dim light of the first glimmer of sun rise. Through his faith and a willingness to allow the Holy Spirit to be poured out on him, guiding him through his call to serve, he experienced spiritual growth that led to the full light of God's most beautiful sunrise, and his world-wide prison ministry was born.

So, as Philip and the disciples were challenged, we will be also. But as the sun rise becomes brighter, as our spiritual vision becomes clearer, we will be empowered to do more effective ministry. Twelve baskets of fragments were gathered after the miracle feeding. Through what we say and do, that is, through our Christian witness, the Holy Spirit will gather those souls suffering a broken relationship with God, He will gather today's "fragments," and they will be added to the flock of Jesus Christ!

So let us choose this day to resolve to live every day in the knowledge and power brought about when God poured his Holy Spirit upon us!

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion, and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.