

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Hollmann's Sermon for the week of July 19, 2009

So What Do You Got? (Mark 6:30-40)

Pentecost 7 (Lectionary Year B)

"I'm hungry." Sound familiar. Maybe you're hungry right now. Maybe you skipped breakfast and your stomach is grumbling, moaning for food. I remember how my son Elijah when he was younger, used to shout out "hungry" when he wanted food. Well, as refined, mannered adults, we don't usually shout out when we're hungry, but all know that empty feeling deep down inside when we really want something to eat. And, as you know, I love to eat: I love sauerkraut and sausage, biryani, samosas, ma-la-dofu, you name it; the list goes on. I might not like to cook, or do the dishes, but, hey, I love to eat, especially when I'm really hungry.

Well in our Gospel reading today from Mark we have a lot of hungry people: five thousand of them, and that's not even counting men and children, for whole families came to hear Jesus. Our reading is the famous story of Jesus' feeding the five thousand.

It turns out that there are many stories in the Bible about being hungry. There's the hungry prophet Elijah who is running for his life from the evil king of the time, and an angel of God feeds him bread and restores his strength.

Then there's probably the most famous story about hunger from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. There we find the hungry people of Israel, thousands of hungry people, out there in the desert on the edge of exhaustion. God had brought his people from slavery in Egypt to freedom. They were on the way to the Promised Land. God wondrously parted the red sea and mightily led his people to safety on dry ground, while he drowned Pharaoh's army and threw horses and riders into the sea.

But the people, out there in the desert on the edge of exhaustion, hunger: they hunger for food, they hunger for Egypt. If only, they cry, if only we were still in Egypt. Sure we were slaves, but at least we had something to eat. Now we're in the middle of nowhere, in the desert, with nothing to eat and we're hungry.

Well God heard their moaning, empty stomachs, heard their cries for food, and he fed them. He provided bread from heaven, manna, which covered the dry desert ground with bread, a sweat bread, and there was always enough to go around.

Fast forward over a thousand years to the ministry and time of Jesus. And in our reading today we have people, over five thousand of them, hungering for Jesus.

Well, hopefully, with all this talk about food and hunger, I've enticed your appetite. So this morning we're going to take a closer look at our Gospel reading from Mark, chapter six.

It's dinner time. It's late. People have come from miles around to see and hear Jesus, the great teacher. Jesus, the healer. Jesus, the miracle worker.

Now, Jesus, we heard in our reading, was planning a relaxing get away, a retreat for his tired disciples. But the crowd was way ahead of him. And when he saw the great crowd, Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion on the people, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Notice our hymns today. Many of them are about Jesus our Good Shepherd, who cares for his sheep, cares for us as he cared for those five thousand people plus by teaching them about the ways of God and everlasting life, of love for God and love for one another.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the compassionate Shepherd, sets the people down in groups on the green grass, makes them lie down in green pastures, as it says in Psalm 23, and fills the hungry with good things.

But this is too much for the worn out disciples. Mark tells us that they had just returned from preaching repentance and cast out demons and healed the sick. They were tired and now this, more people wanting something, more problems.

Maybe you can relate. Perhaps you just want to get away from it all. Just like the disciples who wanted the people to leave. O Jesus, I need a vacation. Or maybe a 'staycation'. I'll just stay where I'm at and I don't want anyone to bother me. Send all those people around me, who crowd in on me, send them all away so I can get some peace.

Jesus says to the disciples: give them something to eat.

No way. The disciples complain, complain like the people in the desert. Where's there any food out here in the wilderness. Where could we possibly find enough to feed all these hungry, needy people?

But, Jesus says: Give these people around us something to eat, give them some help.

What, are you crazy Jesus? How can we offer help to this city, to the people all around us? Hey Jesus, I think you need a lesson in real life economics, in paying the bills and making our budget. Don't you know how much it costs to light this place, let alone the cost of heating? Come on Jesus, we're a small church, we can't give everything we've got. Find someone else.

Jesus asks what they have. Go and see. The disciples go and find five loaves of bread and two fish. Not that much.

But Jesus, oh, he's persistent. Jesus feeds over five thousand with five loaves and two fish.

And Jesus tells us to give all these people around us something to eat, give them some help; show those all around us, those near to us and far, his love in action. Jesus tells us to look around and love.

Look around and what do we see? Go and see, Jesus says. What do we find?

When we look around, outside these walls we see thousands of people in need.

When we look around outside these walls into our homes, we see family members hurting, who need encouragement and comfort.

When we look outside these walls we see our places of work and study, co-workers, friends, fellow students whose lives feel unfulfilled, who are searching, who are restless, to find real lasting meaning in their lives that only God gives.

When we look outside these walls we see the world here in our city, from Pakistan, China, Europe, Africa, all right here all waiting to be touched with Jesus mercy through us.

Today, Jesus tells us to look around and asks us, what do we have? We may not have five loaves of bread and some fish, but we've got God given abilities, experience honed talents, open ended possibilities.

How many abilities and gifts do you have? Go and see.

O, but Jesus, there's no way we can possibly help so many people around us. Come on Jesus, are you serious, how can ever reach so many people around us. This is a big city. And we're a small church. What can we do?

That Jesus, he just won't give up. "Go and see" he tells us. Go and see: we have mouths, we have hands, we have minds, we have vision, we have love.

We have mouths: lips to praise God and encourage one another. We have voices to say to guests and those in our lives hurting, welcome, Jesus cares deeply for you.

We have hands: hands to open, hands to embrace, hands to guide, hands to welcome, hands to give.

We have minds: minds to think thoughts which are noble and true, just, pure and pleasing, thoughts which are commendable and put the best construction on everything, thoughts which lead to serving others.

We have vision: God's vision that all would come to know Jesus Christ and receive him as Lord and Saviour. And we have the vision of heaven in Revelation, the final book of the Bible, where before the throne of God are gathered a great multitude from every nation and people, a multicultural community of faith, like our diverse church here at Ascension.

We have love: the love of Christ who laid down his life for us, and empowers us to love as he loves us. The love of Christ, perfect love, which drives out all fear, all anxiety over the future.

And God uses what we have, no matter how seemingly little and insignificant it may be. In our reading the disciples we're poor. Jesus wanted them to feed over five thousand people. How were they ever going to do that? They were blue collar types and they had given up everything to follow Jesus and now Jesus wanted them, poor, unlettered men, to feed a hungry crowd. They thought Jesus was crazy. Well, according to our economy, Jesus is crazy.

Remember Bill Clinton's campaign slogan for his 1992 successful run for president: it's the economy stupid." It's all about money in our pockets; it's about supply and demand, prices and profits.

We've recently seen the dark side of our economy. We're in an economic crisis largely caused by greed. Swindlers like Bernie Madoff has made off with billions, while here in Montreal Earl Jones cheated hard working families out of millions. Unfortunately, for all the good our economy can bring, for all the increases in standard of living and health, it can also lead to corruption, loss and pain.

Jesus provides us with a new economic order, a new economy, the economy of self-worth.

The economy of relationships where all of us matter deeply to God. The economy of grace.

The economy of the possible. Indeed in Jesus all things are possible, where even small churches like Ascension make a big difference by bringing the love of Christ to this city.

This is my last time preaching here as missionary pastor of Ascension. I want to thank you, the members and friends of this church for all that you have taught me about loving God and loving each other. I've learned a lot from you. I thank God for you. And I will miss you.

And I leave you with words of challenge and words of comfort.

Words of challenge: as you know I've served here as missionary in a special way. But we are all missionaries, witnesses to Jesus and his love. People know we are Christians. And they watch us. We are already witnesses to Jesus whether we want to be or not. I hope we want to be.

And I challenge you, if you can't serve as witness here in this neighbourhood, for whatever good and sound reason, whether you live too far or are too busy, you can still be supportive of the mission here in Park Ex.

And so I challenge all of us to be supportive of our ESL mission, our Chinese fellowship, and other mission events. To not complain, but encourage. To not ignore guests, but to

welcome them. To not bring up old problems and bitterness, but to look forward in the love and the forgiveness and the hope of Christ. And I hope we are now more open to loving our different neighbours, whether they are Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, or agnostic.

And I leave you with words of comfort.

For we know that with God all things are possible. Jesus took a few loaves of ordinary bread and ordinary fish and turned them into a meal for over five thousand complete with leftovers. Jesus made the impossible possible by using what the disciples brought, what they found: five loaves, two fish, enough to go around and more.

God has a sense of humour. God has an uncanny way of surprising us. Remember Sarah's Abraham's wife. She was old, unable to have children and well past the age to give birth. When all of sudden she finds out from God that she will give birth to a son. She laughs. And then she becomes pregnant and gives birth to Isaac, whose name, fittingly enough, means laughter, joy. This church has been around eighty years and, I believe, has years to come. Things will be different. Sarah's life was different after giving birth. But God has a way of surprising us with joy of making the impossible possible, of finding new, vibrant, joyful ways for us to serve God here in this place.

And even though things will change over the years, the God, who does not change, is with us through Jesus, his Son. Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Jesus our constant.

Some of us our young. Some of us not so young. Whatever our age, our situation in life, no matter how ordinary we are, God uses us, floods our hearts with the gift of his Holy Spirit, uses us to bring Jesus to family members, friends, this city.

God uses to us to make Jesus and his message of salvation and hope known to those in our lives. God uses us, fills us with Divine love, to make the impossible possible. God uses us, who we are, meets us where at, and transforms us by his grace to be wonder workers of Divine love.

Through it all, Jesus loves us. Jesus loves you Ascension Lutheran Church. And he'll keep on loving you. And I know he'll keep on surprising you by making the impossible possible. Amen