

Matthew 14:13-21

I wonder if the Lutheran potluck dinner was drawn from this text. After the people were taught, Jesus said to His disciples, “*They do not need to go away...give them something to eat.*” But of course, at a potluck we really feed ourselves. We may eat what others have brought to the table, but we feel justified in taking their food because we, too, brought something to eat...even if only a bag of potato chips.

St. John tells us that the only person who brought food that day was a boy. What were the others thinking? They surely were not planning ahead. Who goes into a desolate place without packing a lunch of some kind? Yet here, of the five thousand families who had followed Jesus, only one, and a boy at that, thought to put food into his back pack.

But how necessary for our sake. We would not have this great story in our Bible had everyone brought food along. We also would not have the narrative before us had that great crowd of people not been in a desolate place.

We can relate to these people. We, too, spend much of our life in a desolate place. Desolate does not just mean a barren place, like a desert, as it does here. It can also mean a place that is lonely. It is a word that can be used to describe a widow or widower; and even that person who is alone, not because of death, but because of isolation in a marriage or family; isolation even from God and His church family.

From the word *desolate* we get desolation. This happened to a city in the Middle Ages after a barbarian army swept over it. It happens to a lush resort town after a massive hurricane comes through. Hell is described by demoniacs, those who are possessed, as a place of desolation - complete and utter isolation. Jesus would enter that desolate place on the cross, but here in our text He goes to a far less desolate place; and yet desolate enough that His disciples become concerned about the welfare of the people.

Someone who lived in Europe before Hitler advanced with his armies would recall how pleasant life was before the destruction came. But a child who was born after the destruction would know life only in that way. You and I do not have the eyes and memory of Adam and Eve. We read in Genesis 2 how pleasant and peaceful our home was, but all we know is life after the destruction and devastation of sin and death.

We may be like the crowd of people in our text. They may have noticed that they were miles away from the nearest McDonald's, but not a word came from their mouths about it. The disciples voice concern, but the people say nothing. They were in desolation. They were unprepared. But they seemed not to care.

Do we recognize and admit the truth that this world is a place of desolation? Do you and I acknowledge our part in this; that we ourselves have often left a trail of desolation and isolation? Sin has the power to desolate and isolate. Hurtful words that come from our mouths, not to mention hurtful actions, act like an army leaving desolation in its wake. I wonder how many in our families, and in our church family, feel isolated because of what I, or you, have said or done...whether it was intentional or not on our part. It is surely reason to repent.

God, in His mercy, does not leave us in the mini “hells” we have created for ourselves and for others. In our text, Jesus is not unconcerned that the crowds are without sustenance in that place which is desolate. He is the provider. There isn't much to speak of with which to provide. Only five loaves and two fish.

But what is meager in our eyes is plenty in the eyes of God. Jesus has the people sit down. It's time to eat. There is barely enough food for two, yet Jesus calls them all to the table. He speaks a blessing - the prayer before the meal. And then He takes into His hands the bread and fish, breaks them into pieces, gives them to His disciples, and His disciples to the people. Everyone eats and is satisfied.

Now it was still a desolate place after the people ate. But that did not matter anymore. Everyone's need was met. The people had the strength to go to their homes. Jesus had provided for them. No place is desolate when Jesus is there.

This world is, and will remain, a desolate place until its end. But there need be no cause for concern on our part. Jesus is with us. He is the provider. He gives food to all, even to those who do not acknowledge Him as Lord.

But even a person who has eaten his fill can live in desolation. A heart that does not have Christ in it is a desolate place. A life lived in luxury, but apart from Jesus, is a life that is desolate. To have hundreds of Facebook friends, but not to know Christ as the greatest Friend of all, is to live in isolation.

Jesus wants no one to live in this way. He created you to live in fellowship with Him. Satan's army came through and destroyed that communion. And so we are born into this desolate world isolated from our Creator. But He is the one who provides for all our needs. He used bread and fish to provide for the people years ago. He uses water and the Word to provide for you. In baptism He called you out of isolation. He drew you into His church family. He gave His Spirit to live in you.

But that's not all He does. You see, we sin daily and deserve nothing but punishment. We, who are the baptized, isolate ourselves from Jesus and His church family. Maybe guilt does this to us. It's easy to withdraw when we feel shame. It's hard to gather in communion with Christ and other Christians when we don't feel like much of a Christian.

Only one boy, of those five thousand families, brought with him what he needed for that desolate place. You and I are not that boy. We do not have what it takes to provide for our needs in this desolate place. Nor do we have what it takes to provide for others. We came into this world with nothing, not even bread and fish.

But Jesus provides. He takes care of you in body and soul. He loves His baptized children. He sees your desolation and He knows your isolation. And so He calls you to His Table. Here, using bread and wine, He calls you back into communion with Himself and with all other Christians.

He knows what it's like to live in isolation. He endured that agony on the cross. He went into that lonely place where even His Father refused to go, so that you never have to go there. Instead, He gives you a place with Him away from all desolation and isolation. You have a place here in His house. You have a place at His table. Your place here is with other sinners like yourself, but sinners who are forgiven just as you are forgiven. And your place here is with Jesus. No matter how desolate this world becomes; no matter how isolated you think you are, you are with family here, and you are with your Lord who is your provider.

Those five thousand families were given enough to journey back home. And so with you. Jesus gives you what you need, in body and soul, to journey through this world of desolation to your home above. Amen.