

*“This is a desolate place.”* As if Jesus needs to have His disciples inform Him of this. That’s why He went there. He wanted to pray in a desolate place. Like going into His room and shutting the door behind Him.

But they follow Him. Masses of people follow Him. Not just five thousand. This is just the number of the men. Women and children too. More like twelve to fifteen thousand, or more. All these people open the door to the room which He enters to pray.

So is it still a desolate place? Desolate is primarily defined as being empty of people. A desert is considered to be desolate because few people live there. So, with regard to the place of our text, it is now likely the least desolate place in all of Galilee. Still, the disciples come to Jesus and say, *“This is a desolate place.”* What...can’t they see all the people? Yet, precisely because of all the people they call the place desolate.

So there must be another definition. And there is. Desolate can also mean being empty of that which we need. We need to eat. Jesus’ disciples know this. But there isn’t enough food for 15,000 people to eat. Just five loaves of bread and two fish. It is, therefore, a desolate place. *“Send them away,”* they urge Jesus. The people need to leave this place of desolation.

Have you ever been to a desolate place? For some people, maybe more than we realize, their entire life is lived in desolation. Their needs are hardly being met. The basic needs of food, shelter, love, Yes, love. A city crammed with people can be a desolate place when everyone is a stranger.

For more than four months now our entire world has seen much desolation. People staying home, avoiding others. And when they do venture out, hiding themselves behind masks. But we need all this, right? We need to stay healthy. We need to avoid the virus out there. We also need each other. People are sitting in desolation right now. In nursing homes, even in their own homes. We seem to be sacrificing one basic human need for the sake of another. All because of the pandemic.

Last week the question of why God allowed, or sent this pandemic, was asked of a group of pastors. Most answers focused upon His judgments. Yet are we overlooking His gracious purposes? God seems to work best in times of desolation. The miracle of Jesus feeding the multitude would not have taken place had it not been a place of desolation. All His miracles were done because the people had needs to be met, because they were desolate. Sinners who came to Jesus, came because they were desolate. They needed Him. Those whose needs were being met, such as the Pharisees, did not come to Jesus. They had no need of what He had to give. This was their attitude, at least.

The present pandemic has placed our world in pretty much the same place as are the crowds in our text. There is great need. They were in need of food. Today the masses of people need the food of life, the Gospel of salvation. This is not overlooking all the other needs that the people of our world have in our present day. Nonetheless, a needy person who has the Gospel of Jesus Christ has everything.

We entered this world with nothing. We were born completely cut off from our Creator. Sin does this, and we were born in sin. But in Holy Baptism Jesus called you out of that desolation, drawing you to Himself in love. Your baptism assures you that God is merciful...to you. Your sins, all of them, are forgiven. The Sacrament is before you, and is for you. This is forgiveness you can touch and taste. More assurance. Jesus is giving you what you need.

And so you and I are, I suppose we can say, in the place of Jesus' disciples in our text. Jesus broke the bread and the fish into pieces and gave these to His disciples. Great! Now they could eat. No more desolation for them. But you know that the disciples were to do. Give the food to the crowds to they, too, could eat and be taken out of their desolation.

Is not this what Jesus expects of us? Yet we are prone to say with the disciples, "*Send the crowds away.* I need to avoid people right now."

Friends, Jesus knows our needs. He provides for all our needs. What would He have said to His disciples had they not taken the food out to the needy people?

Jesus wants no one to live in desolation. That's why He endured the desolation of the cross. He was cut off from His own dear Father in heaven. "*My God,*" He cried, "*Why have You forsaken Me!*" Jesus entered that utter desolation for you and me, and for all people. He won the precious gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation for every person living in desolation.

If this is you, be comforted. Jesus is breaking the loaves right now – the bread of life – and giving this food of salvation to you. If you came here today desolate, you are in desolation no more. Jesus forgives you. Your sins are pardoned. Life, real life with your loving Creator is yours now in Christ, and yours forever in heaven.

What you have been given is for you, and yes, it is for all. There is someone in your life, and in mine, who is in desolation. What a joy and privilege that Jesus, who gives you all you need, says, "*You give them something to eat.*" Amen.