

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 9: 18-17

Ephesians 3: 14-21

Mark 6: 30-44

July 25, 2021

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I can recall a bumper sticker from my youth. It said, “Next time you think you’re perfect, try walking on water.” I always thought this was a little foolish. Even if I did walk on water, it wouldn’t prove I was perfect. Nor was that the intent of Jesus on that morning in the waning hours of darkness. He was not trying to prove that He was perfect. Frankly, I am not sure it is fair for us to expect God to prove Himself to us anyway. This is the arrogance of modern man, to expect God to submit Himself to the scientific method, submit to our test-tube trials, in order to satisfy our own curiosity. There is a reasonable question for us to ask though; what was Jesus doing there? It is an unexpected path for Him to take. Generally speaking, He was content to use the traditional means of travel. Why not this time? It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense for Jesus to be out there. The answer is that He was doing exactly what He came to do; He was being the Messiah.

It is a little unfortunate that the church calendar separates the events of this week and last week because they are essentially different components of a singular narrative. I guess the reading would be too long if they were joined into one lesson. By separating them, the impression is left that there are two miracles here, two supernatural revelations about the divine nature of Jesus. The whole event is better understood if the happenings, the feeding of the five thousand and His walking on water, are viewed simultaneously. That isn’t just a crazy idea of mine... not this time. Mark says it: “they had not understood about the loaves.” In other words, we can’t possibly understand this remarkable stroll without the context of the miraculous feeding. I would also argue that we can’t really understand what Jesus was doing with the loaves without having His late-night journey in mind.

So, let’s recap the reading from last week on the feeding of the five thousand. The disciples were spent. They were so busy with the work they were called to do that they didn’t have time to eat. They were in a desolate place, a place without food. Though they went away for some downtime with the Rabbi, they were followed by many hungry mouths. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, does what a Good Shepherd would do. He makes sure that the sheep are fed. Mark capitalizes on the shepherd theme in two ways: First, by noting that the people were like sheep without a shepherd. Second, by explaining that the people, who were in the desolate wilderness, were seated on the green grass, evoking the images of Psalm 23. The Good Shepherd motif is more than just a pleasant image of a caring provider seeing to the needs of his sheep. Far from it. In the ancient world, Kings were said to be the shepherds of the people, and the ideal kings would be those who put the needs of the sheep above their own political desires.¹ Remember also that in Israel, the ideal king was King David who was a shepherd. By tending to the sheep who had no shepherd,

¹ Examples of this include Homer’s description of Agamemnon (Iliad II), Xenophon’s Memoirs of Socrates (Book III), and Plato’s Republic (Book I).

Jesus is the ideal King who ensures that the needs of others are met, and the source of their satisfaction cannot be exhausted because Jesus is the infinite God. The Messiah was supposed to be such a king, and that is just the kind of king Jesus is.

The twelve baskets of bread that were left over would remind any Jew of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve loaves of the Bread of the Presence that were part of the Tabernacle and Temple cults. The twelve loaves of bread were to be eaten by the priests in a holy place. In terms of messianic fulfillment, rightly understood, Mark is presenting Jesus as the Good Shepherd to the people of Israel, and as the one who restores the twelve tribes by gathering them together. Jesus is not just the kindly tender of the flock, but a real King over a real people. In this way, He was fulfilling messianic expectations, but even the disciples didn't quite get it.

Another messianic expectation that Jesus fulfilled was that the Messiah would reconstitute the manna from heaven. This is most evident in the discussion recorded in John 6 that follows this feeding in the wilderness in which Jesus declares Himself to be the bread from heaven, the manna. Manna; this is the strange substance that would appear on the ground each morning while the Jews made their way through the wilderness after the Exodus. There the people of Israel were, in a desolate place without food, and God fed them.² The Psalmist recounts the event this way: "He gave the command to the skies above and opened the doors of the heavens; he rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven. Human beings ate the bread of angels, he sent them all the food they could eat."³ Something to know is that this Psalm closes with a reference to King David who is described as the Shepherd of Israel. In two ways then, Jesus is doing what the Messiah was supposed to do; shepherding the people of Israel as the new Moses who provides bread from heaven, and as the new King David who leads with integrity of heart and skillful hands.⁴

So, if the feeding of the five thousand is a fulfillment of what some Jews were looking for in the Messiah, then what is the point of Jesus walking on the water that night? That was our original question. It was near the end of the night when the disciples spotted Jesus. They were probably tired at this point, but they were not scared. The sight of some specter on the water was terrifying to the disciples, not because they were afraid of ghosts, but because the ancients believed that such an apparition on the water at night meant that death was approaching. We might scoff at their reaction, but the fear of the disciples was understandable. The last person they expected to see as they made their way from the desolate place was Jesus. If they had understood the loaves, however, they would not have been startled by His appearance, but there are some things that we have to set aside if we are to grasp the significance of these events.

First, to us moderns, the miracles of Jesus speak to His divinity. For the ancients, who live in the world of Homer, Ovid, Aeschylus, and others, it was expected that gods would do such things. We have to set aside how we would have reacted under such circumstances, and see the events as the ancients did. Second, it would be a little petty if Jesus was walking on water simply to demonstrate His superiority to Neptune. We also have to set aside the idea that Jesus lived in the

² Exodus 16:1-5.

³ Psalm 78:23-25.

⁴ Psalm 78:72.

same world as 20th century Christian-dominated America. This was no competition with false gods. Jesus wasn't one-upping anyone here. In Matthew, Peter sinks into the waters, but that is because of his lack of faith, not his lack of divinity or perfection. What Jesus was doing on that windy morning was showing the path of the new exodus, and He is it. For Moses and Israel, God had to clear away the waters so they could pass through the Red Sea on dry land. For the Messiah, even that is unnecessary, for He leads His people through the waters by keeping them safely in the boat. Dry land or raging sea, they are the same to Jesus, and nothing interferes with His messianic course. He goes forward, but He also provides the proper vessel for His sheep.

We, on the other hand, still fear specters of many kinds. We fear what we shouldn't fear. We fail to see that Christ is beside us in the waters because we have lost faith that He will be there. So, we row fruitlessly against the tide. I am not trying to say everything in this life should be easy, but isn't it remarkable how well things fall into place, seemingly without effort, when there is a greater plan at work? In this world, we are to be wise as serpents, which sometimes means being subversive within the system rather than thrashing about raucously within it. Printed pamphlets, not internet memes lead to revolutions and reformations.

The Church has come to a time of contention, where discussions about God-given liberty and respect for the polis are in the balance. We should not assume that this current time is comparable to another. We are not faced with ethical struggles like those faced by Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators. I still believe that our society is incredibly decent comparatively. The tactics expected of us in our situation may not be so easily discerned. This means we are more in a time like the civil rights era of the 50's and 60's, in America than the 1940's in Germany, and our tactics might reflect men and women like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Heschel. The time has come for calm and rational civil disobedience, but we had better not confuse our purely political actions with a moral imperative. This is not easy because there could be ambiguity between the two. So, we must pray continually that the actions we willfully take, whatever they are, are in accord with God's will. This requires humility, patience, and trust in His unfolding gracious activity.

Distrust is increasing in so many institutions: government, news sources, education (both private and public), medical experts, elections (both sides sowed seeds of distrust after the outcomes in 2016 and 2020); what has survived unscathed? Over the last decades, the Church has taken a hit, in some ways deservedly and not so deservedly in others. It isn't just the hostility of the culture that is to blame. We have to be willing to examine ourselves for the sins of indifference and disdain we have engaged in toward those around us.

Perhaps churches have spent too much time making people feel guilty about their sins of weak wills and ignored those sins that come from a different, strong-willed place, a place more difficult to identify and convict. We have failed to treat every person as if they were treasured by God. We have failed to go out of our way to meet other's needs. We have deemed others unworthy of our assistance, so we decline to help. Like the disciples, when people are in need, we are quick to say we can't help, so we want them sent away, lest their neediness testify to our disdain. Before we can ever hope to change the culture around us, we must first wholly love those who are part of it, recognizing that Christ has redeemed even what seems irredeemable to us. We

have not always understood what the multiplication of the loaves meant. We have failed to see the messianic implications of it, and so we have failed to live as though Christ is our King. As a result, we have been hard-hearted.

Christ has shown us a better way, and that way is the way of compassion, the way of His cross. Jesus did not show favoritism in the feeding of the masses. He was indiscriminate, and His grace softens even our own hard hearts. His grace is without preconditions and willingly given in abundance, just as God didn't feed some of Israel while letting others starve. Nor should we expect that everyone we help in the church will become regular attendees or faithful according to our expectations. We are to embrace people either way. Jesus didn't throw Judas out of the boat, assuming he was there with the disciples. Sometimes, we will grow tired of pressing forward, of rowing this boat in our vocational tasks. We might even question why God is so gracious, to us and to others. In those moments, let us find rest in the comforting presence of Christ who guides us through the tumultuous waters of this life. Let us remind ourselves of how much forgiveness we have been given. Don't lose sight of the Messiah, for He continues to walk with us as we ride in the boat. Literally, you are in the nave, the Latin word for boat. It is not mere coincidence that when the disciples recognized Jesus and He got into the boat with them, their work ceased. They had arrived on the other side. He had taken them through the waters of their own exodus. He does the same thing with us, entering into the waters of baptism and bringing us to a new life in Him.

There are waters we must traverse in this life. It is foolish to desire to walk across them effortlessly. We will follow in His way while staying in the boat of His Church, for that is where He has gathered us. Here, He feeds us with the very bread from heaven. Here, He takes us through the waters of baptism, and leads us to the other side, the promised place He prepares for us. His heart is never hardened toward humanity, for He has compassion on us. He doesn't expect us to be perfect; He wants us to ride in the boat where He can make us His holy people. As His holy people, He works through us as we share the light of His love with the world around us. We should hardly marvel at Jesus walking on water. He is God after all. What we should marvel at is His unsurpassed love for us. We should marvel at how He feeds us with His gifts. We should marvel at how He guides us as our Shepherd King, even through the challenges of life. He has won for us life in Him. So let us live in the reality of having Christ as our Messianic King.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.