

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost-Year A

August 3rd, 2014; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:31-21

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church

Good morning. The first Sunday of August is here and many are asking, “What happened to the month of July?” For some reason, July in Wisconsin flies by but the cold month of February seems to last forever. Why that is...I don't know but it'll be a great question to ask God some day.

All of us have questions for God. With God as our Heavenly Father, it's expected that we, as his children, would have our questions. As a parent, I learned quickly how valuable questions are to children. “Daddy, why can't I have cookies for breakfast?” and “Why do I have to brush my teeth again?”

There's one statement, actually one word, that kids say, which your kids have said and kids you know have said, that reflects a commonality that children share with adults. That word is: mine. You may have heard lines from the poem “Toddler's Rules”: If I want it, it's mine. If it's in my hand, it's mine. If I think it's mine, it's mine.

As an adult, I find myself echoing that notion of mine. For example, my wife and I use our coupons, save our dollars and keep a close eye on our budget because we work hard for what we earn-because it's ours, it's mine. We learned from smart financial people over the years that it's key to go against the trend of buying more stuff in fulfilling that quest of 'mine'. Credit and debt are not your friends; put dollars to getting rid of debt. Pay in cash, when you can't-save until you can.

We live in a culture where the message, the status quo is to live by the phrase of 'mine': your interests, your wants, your desires.

All of have known, or encountered someone, where their tone of 'mine' was overwhelming and it radiated arrogance, selfishness and even poor decision making. It's not just in other people, you've had 'mine' guide your living at various times.

You've had an argument with a family member or a friend and you both thought you were right. All the while the 'mine' you held on to was pride or your viewpoint. A local organization asks if you'd be willing to volunteer for an event to benefit others in the community-you say 'no' because your time is yours-it's 'mine'. You're enjoying the picturesque landscape as you drive down Clairemont Avenue until you notice the person behind you is riding your bumper, tailgating you and intruding the space that is yours, it's mine.

Since Adam and Eve ate the apple in the garden of Eden, humanity has always been guided by the appealing yet destructive pursuit of 'mine'. God knew this and in one amazing event on a hillside, Jesus addressed it. This story is so highly regarded that it is the only miracle story in all four of the gospels. It is Jesus feeding the five thousand. We're going to look at this story in how it relates to us today and then I'm going to end reading powerful sections of a letter inspired by this gospel story.

Today we're in Matthew chapter 14 and up to now in the gospel, Jesus has taught extensively. He's healed a paralytic and even healed Peter's (his closest disciple's) mother-in-law from a severe illness. The miracle all the disciples experienced upon them was when Jesus calmed the storm and saved their lives.

Through all of this, Jesus is becoming a rock star, so to speak and I'm guessing the disciples were excited to be so close to him. Everywhere they went, people were talking about Jesus, coming from all over hoping

to catch a glimpse of him. Things were going well until Matthew ends chapter 13 and begins chapter 14.

Chapter 13 ends with Jesus' surprising rejection from his hometown. Chapter 14 begins with the murder of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist by Herod at the request of his wife and stepdaughter. I won't go into the details but the key point is that one of Jesus relatives, who proclaimed the coming of the Messiah and a new kingdom of God, was dead.

Similar to what many do when they hear bad news, Jesus went away to be by himself. He doesn't just go for a walk. He gets in boat and rows away to a deserted place. Like overbearing paparazzi today, the crowd goes out to be near him, keeping an eye on him while walking on the shore. It's getting dark, Jesus is getting tired so he rows toward land. What he sees is breath-taking, a huge crowd of people waiting for him. Some likely knew of what happened to his cousin and they were there to support him while others simply wanted to be near him or receive something from him.

He doesn't get angry. Perhaps that's the first miracle. Many of us after being rejected from family and friends at home, then learning your cousin had just been murdered...let's be honest-to have people gathering to be served by you would make any person irate. Matthew says Jesus had compassion for them and started to heal their sick. The disciples see this and their watching the sun get lower in the sky. They are far from any town and being the practical guys they were they thought it was time to end the gathering and they ask Jesus to send people home so the people could eat.

This is where it gets interesting: Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." We've got nothing Jesus. Five loaves of bread. Two fish. Sorry everyone. Show's over. We've got nothing else for you.

The disciples were anxious and overly concerned because food, or lack of food, could have easily caused a riot. Food in the first century represented security, well-being and compassion. Have you ever wondered why there are so many sick people in the Bible? It was because of a lack of food and nourishment. If you fed the masses, you had leadership and you had control.

The Bible has a re-occurring message that it is God's will for people to have food. God provided food for his people in the wilderness in the Book of Exodus. Jesus' first temptation in the wilderness was to turn stone to bread. In describing God's final judgment in Matthew 25, the first condition for those who are chosen to be on God's right hand is this: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, for I was hungry and you gave me food."

In this story today, Jesus continues that tradition is his first miracle involving food. Disciples replied, "What have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." He orders everyone to have sit down. People likely looked at each other and some may have been asking their neighbor, "What is he going to do?"

He takes the loaves and fish, looks up to heaven, blesses the food and gives them back to the disciples. The disciples start handing out the food, and handing out more food and handing out more food. The disciples are aghast and what's happening as is everyone else. They had more food in that moment than they had ever seen before in their lives! There is joy. There is awe. Jesus has taken was seemed like nothing, and made it into something. This story is reflected on the night of the Last Supper when Jesus' final act with his disciples, was sharing a meal with them.

In a way, all of us are like the disciples. We see the needs around us and look at what we have and immediately feel defeated, let down and discouraged that we don't have enough for ourselves or others. We have nothing. It's far easier to say we don't have any time to help. We don't have any love to forgive. We don't have any dollars share. We don't have any one that cares for us and understands our challenges. The status quo is to hold to 'mine' and how bad things are or appear.

Jesus doesn't settle for that. When there was a need, a problem that needed to be addressed and resources that could be used...he did something. For Jesus, the disciples and first century Christians, they didn't have book deals, they didn't have radio, talk shows, there weren't big churches. The only thing Christians had was a platform of generosity and compassion because of what Jesus taught and modeled for them.

This was in stark contrast to the culture they lived in. The Roman culture was informed by the Greek culture and it believed in a pantheon of Gods who could care less about human beings, might makes right, no compassion, women and children had no rights. Into this chaotic, non-compassionate way of living- Jesus came in and taught this radical message of compassion and generosity.

For us today, this way of living out our faith can be summed up in this one statement: "Share, not despair, is what God asks of you."

God in Jesus is saying: Don't settle for the status quo. That's easy to do and that doesn't change anything. Be strong. Take the high road and share what you've learned from me and what I've given you. You've heard words of forgiveness today-go forgive that person that wronged you. You've been fed with bread and wine-go and provide food for those in need. You are loved-you better tell those you love how important they are to you.

Julian the Apostate was the Roman Emperor from 360-363 and as emperor he wanted to see a revival of paganism. This Christianity thing had gone too far. He funded pagan temples and the pagan priesthood. He had bumper stickers made. It was a total failure. He wrote a letter complaining about the Christians doing so well and paganism was failing. I wanted to share with you these two statements of his that are just the perfect spring board into our week.

He wrote, "Recent Christian growth is caused by their moral character, even if pretended, (he didn't buy it), and by their benevolence toward strangers." The reason Christians are growing in their influence is not their preaching or churches is because they are just so good, kind and generous to strangers. "The impious Galileans, support not only their poor but ours as well." How are ever going to have a revival of paganism if we can't even take care of our poor people while the Christians are doing it?

In a world of 'mine', you have a different role to live out as a disciple of Jesus Christ. For Jesus dying for our sins, removing our guilt, our fears, our hopelessness...we have forgiveness and the hopeful possibility of things being better than they are. Better not only in the future, but right here, right now. It'll take you, the person next to you, all of us to give God thanks for what we've received in order that we can change the world in powerful ways. 'Share, not despair, is what God asks of you'...now, go be the change you, and God, want to happen. Amen.

