

This sermon was preached by Pastor Heather at Trinity Lutheran Church on July 31, 2011.

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³Now when Jesus heard this (that John the Baptism had been killed), he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard of it, they followed Jesus on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶Jesus said to his disciples, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And Jesus said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The Gospel of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A week ago, I returned from family camp in the Black Hills of SD. Family camp is a long standing tradition at Trinity—every summer, families travel to a Lutheran Bible Camp there, called: Outlaw Ranch.

It's a funny name for a Bible camp, really. *I forget that*, until I talk with someone who hasn't heard of Outlaw before, and their face sort of scrunches up, as they repeat the word "Outlaw? Bible Camp?"

There is a great story behind the name, actually. Back in the 1800's, the ranch, that is now **Outlaw Ranch**, was bought by a man named Benjamin Butts. Ben ran a trading post in Winner, SD.

As the story goes, the local settlers were irate with Ben, because of the way he traded with Native Americans—Ben gave Natives the same price for goods that he offered white settlers. Those white settlers named Ben an "outlaw" because he didn't show them the expected favor; because he didn't discriminate. He treated Natives like he treated everyone else.

Ben Butts never changed his ways, and when he and his wife bought a ranch down near Custer, they named it **Outlaw Ranch**. When Outlaw Ranch one day was purchased for the purpose of developing a

Bible Camp, pastors and lay leaders decided to keep the name “Outlaw,” for Jesus, himself, often fit the bill.

Not unlike Ben Butts, Jesus welcomed the outcasts, even when everyone else objected. He stood against every system of oppression, every system of domination, every system that willingly neglected the least, the lost, the poor, the forgotten. And in that sense, we are ALL called to be outlaws with Jesus, too.

There is some rather outlaw-ish behavior taking place in our gospel story, actually, too. Our gospel is a story most everyone knows, but maybe not for what I present today. So listen up, if you will.

First of all, this story occurs in every one of the 4 gospels, which is rare; and in Matthew and Mark, it occurs twice in one form or another. So, 6 times in total, we hear this story in the New Testament.

In the version we hear from Matthew this morning, Jesus and the disciples have gone to a deserted place, seeking peace and quiet. They’ve just receive terrible news. They’ve learned of John the Baptist’s death at the hands of Herod. They want to retreat, to mourn, to regroup—**but** a large crowd has followed them, and so *instead*, out of Jesus’ **compassion** for the crowd, he and his disciples spend the whole day ministering to all them.

As the sun begins to set, Jesus’ disciples worry about how all these people will be fed. Shouldn’t they send them to town to fend for themselves? **Jesus says, No. NO. “YOU give them something to eat.”**

Here’s what I want you to imagine: Just think about how many different people must have been among those 5-10 thousands folks, counting women and children. Just think about the different walks of life, represented there.

- o The poor, the homeless? Yep.
- o The sick, the crippled, uhuh.
- o Prostitutes, tax collectors, yes, likely.
- o Even a Pharisee or a Sadducee, perhaps.
- o Farmers, laborers, merchants, indentured servants, land owners, widows, wives, husbands, children...get the picture? All sorts of people.

And in the ancient world, one did not just sit down to table with anyone. To eat with another, signified some sense of respect and concern, and mutuality. Do you see what Jesus is doing in this meal? Offered to all? Not just those whom everyone deems worthy; not just those who fit into a culturally accepted role—Jesus tells his disciples *to feed them all*. **Together**.

This will become a meal of radical hospitality—this will become a meal that celebrates a whole new **economy**: in the kingdom of God, **all** matter. And *each* must matter to the other, too. **THIS** is how God’s household works; this is what God’s economy looks like. All fed together.

Jesus provided these “egalitarian” kind of meals throughout his ministry. Think how often he was labeled an *outlaw*, for eating with sinners and tax collectors, for healing on the Sabbath, for talking to women, to Samaritans, to all those of the fringes of society. Jesus, the outlaw. Radical, in his acts of grace and inclusion.

When we celebrate Holy Communion, do you realize that is what we are enacting? Radical hospitality to one another? When we come to the table, we become willing participants in God’s economy—God’s household that is the kingdom of God--where **Grace** is our gift, and **justice** is our calling. We are called to live as outlaws, in the same sense Jesus did—radical in our inclusion and compassion.

Whenever someone says to me, “*faith is a personal matter,*” I want to say, “*have you read the Bible?*” Throughout our scriptures, faith has political, economic and social implications. Yes, *of course* faith is personal, in the sense that Christ saves and transforms our hearts and minds—but faith in our God of love, most certainly **calls us** to want to transform the world, too.

Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” In the Greek, the “*you*” is emphatic: YOU! Jesus didn’t feed the multitude alone. “*You* give them something to eat.” The disciples answer, “But we have nothing...only 5 loaves and 2 fish.”

Now I don’t want to be too critical, but that’s not exactly “nothing.” Granted, when looking at that expansive crowd—it SEEMED like nothing, it FELT like nothing—and we can relate, with a world of hurts and needs around us, what can we do? We can’t answer them all! But, five loaves, two fish, is not “nothing.” It will feed *someone*.

On the mountain, Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, who then gave it to the crowd. You can’t help but hear the Eucharistic overtones—this is *communion language*.

Matthew wants for us to *see ourselves* on the mountain; to trust that WE are fed by the body of Christ; to see anew how we are fed by one another, too. WE become a part of this collective whole: the body of Christ in the world, the kingdom of God, here and now. *And* we are called to *participate* in God’s economy, God’s household, where all are fed, with more than enough.

This becomes our vision, our dream for the world. We no longer just “feed for ourselves,” rather, our lives become a part of God’s. Our faith becomes a shared venture, with a vision for our world where **all have enough**.

In a lecture I recently attended, a theologian coined the term “enough-ism.” Christians are called to practice “enough-ism,” where we reject the cultural norms of accumulating more and more; AND we work toward building just societies, where less have to live with not nearly enough.

“YOU give them something to eat,” Jesus says. Jesus commissions us and empowers us to practice God’s economy, and to live as members of God’s household. To be fed, and to feed. God transforms us, from the inside out; God calls us to transform the world.

Like Ben Butts and all faithful outlaws like him, we are called to live our faith right where we are, with the very gifts we have been given, practicing enough-ism in our everyday lives. We follow one Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, less commonly known, as Outlaw Jesus.

With God at work in us and through us, miracles still abound. **And we get to be part of them.** Thanks be to God! Amen.