

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“A Church Picnic Disaster!”**

**Matthew 14: 13 – 21**

**First Sunday in Lent**

**February 14, 2016**

You know, over the years, I suppose I’ve attended *hundreds* of church picnics, potlucks, and fellowship dinners. I mean, I’ve stuffed my face with enough casseroles, dips, quiches, and three bean salads to feed a small army. I’ve eaten more drumsticks, sloppy Joes, mashed potatoes, and bell pepper spears than you could shake a stick at. I’ve digested every species of brownie, cookie, pie, and cake known to man.

Sometimes these meals have been held down in a dining room or fellowship hall... sometimes they’ve been held in a lounge, or parlor, or church gym... sometimes they’ve been held at the beach. At one time or another, I’ve attended picnics in the park, lunches on the lawn, repasts by the river, and cookouts under the canopy. I’ve eaten upstairs, downstairs, inside, outside, at the public park, and in various private residences. I’ve done large, small... formal, freestyle... come and go, and come as you are.

In other words, in fifty-nine years of being part of Christian church communities... I’ve managed to pull up a chair at just about any kind of fellowship family meal that you can think of! And all of these meals have had one very important thing in common: and that was plenty, and I do mean, *plenty* of food!

Believe me, nobody ever goes hungry at a Presbyterian church potluck! And that’s been the case at pretty much every church I’ve ever attended, or pastored, or visited with my family. It’s almost like some kind of unspoken Eleventh Commandment of church life: “*Thou shalt not run out of food!*” And, sure enough, nobody ever does!

Except for that one time... out on the shores of the Sea of Galilee... when Jesus invited five thousand of his closest friends and disciples over for a picnic lunch... *and then had nothing to serve them!* Oh, except for five small loaves of bread... and a couple of pint-sized pickled fish!

Hey, compared to *that* sorry looking spread, a happy meal at the local drive-thru looks like Rachel Ray’s greatest hits! Jesus wasn’t going to feed *five* hungry people with rations like that... let alone five *thousand*. And that’s not even counting the women and kids. I mean, there they were, with growling stomachs, camped out on the grass of Galilee... expecting to be *fed*. And there wasn’t a buffet line in sight. Or a dessert table... or a cheese tray... or Mary Magdalene’s gefilte fish salad. There was no James and John, out back somewhere flipping camel burgers on the grill.

It was getting dark, they were miles from the nearest village, breakfast had long ago been digested... and there was *nothing* for the people to eat! Nothing! Except those five little loaves... and those two little fish. It was, to use the technical theological term

that they taught us back in Princeton... **a church picnic disaster!** And there was Jesus, at the head of the table, presiding over the whole culinary calamity!

Now, the disciples quickly realized that a major violation of potluck protocol was about to take place... so they urged Jesus to do the only sensible thing: dismiss the crowd so they could go make their own arrangements for dinner. *“The disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.’”*

Now, that sounds reasonable. If you don’t have enough to feed everybody, clear the deck and tell everyone they’re on their own! Any of us with children have probably done that very thing lots of times... when there’s twenty neighborhood kids playing in the yard, and you’ve only got three hot dogs in the fridge! When it’s time to eat, you tell the neighbor kids they can come back after supper! Well, that’s what the disciples were trying to get Jesus to do. *“It’s been nice... hope you enjoyed the sermon... watch out for those crazy Nazareth drivers... see ya’ next time... buh-bye!”* And so on.

But before they could put their evacuation plan into effect, Jesus stopped them and said, “No, no, no... don’t shoo them away! You guys can feed them!” *“Jesus replied, ‘They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat.’”*

To which the disciples responded, *“Us give them something to eat? Jesus, are you kidding? All we have are these five little loaves and two small fish... how on earth do you expect us to feed a crowd like that, with supplies like this?”*

It appeared that Jesus was giving the disciples an impossible task to perform. A job too big to be done. An act of hospitality too ambitious for even the most gracious and accommodating of hosts to pull off. Which, of course, is where the real point of the story kicks in. Because, Jesus didn’t really expect the disciples to feed those people at all... all along, He knew that, if anyone was going to be fed, He was the one who was going to have to do the feeding. And He wanted it to be clear that what He was about to do... could only be done by Him, and not by anyone else.

And so Matthew goes on to tell us that, after asking the disciples to bring the loaves and the fish to Him, Jesus: *“Directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.”*

Jesus fed five thousand people... with what amounted to a small sack lunch... and everyone was filled... and no one went away hungry. A church picnic **disaster...** was turned into a church picnic **miracle!** But, be assured that this miracle had nothing to do with food, really. It wasn’t really about lunch, or dinner, or the fact that McDonald’s had not yet opened a franchise in Galilee. No, at the end of the day, this miracle wasn’t about empty stomachs... it was about empty hearts. It wasn’t about people hungry for food... it was about people hungry for hope. It wasn’t about filling bellies with a nice hot meal... it was about filling lives with meaning, and with peace, and with the assurance of God’s eternal love.

You see, the downcast, downtrodden, down-on-their-luck people who'd followed Jesus out to the lake that day weren't just hungry for bread... they were hungry for hope. They weren't just famished for a sandwich... they were starving for peace in their hearts. They weren't just looking for a free lunch... they were looking for healing in their aching arms, and legs, and backs. These people were positively ravenous for a sign that their struggling, frustrating, challenging lives were *not* beyond the reach of God's love and concern... *that's* the reassurance that they were really craving.

So, sure, Jesus took some loaves and fishes and gave everybody a nice picnic lunch. But in doing so, you see, He gave them something else, too: He gave them the sign that God was *there*, with them, and willing to fill them with so much more than mere food... if they would just love Him, and follow Him, and entrust their lives to Him. The nourishment that the people needed, for their stomachs *and* for their souls... is the nourishment Jesus gave them, when He blessed and broke the bread that day.

So, even though their *stomachs* were no doubt empty again, by the time they got back home from their picnic by the lake... they knew that their *hearts* would never again be empty. Because they had been touched by the Lord Himself... and filled with the reassurance that there's no hunger on earth that would ever be able to separate them from God's love, God's peace, God's grace.

And that same message, of course, is just as true for you and me today... as it was for that crowd of five thousand, so many years ago. Like them, our lives are fraught with fear and anxiety and stress and uncertainty. Like them, we are bowed under the weight of physical illness, emotional distress, and spiritual confusion. Like them, we need to know that our Lord still loves us... that our God still cares for us... that our Savior still has His eye on us, in the midst of all our problems and predicaments.

We come to this church today, as hungry as they were... in our hearts, in our souls, in our spirits. And the same Jesus who met that crowd, out at the Sea of Galilee... meets us here this morning, maybe not with loaves and fishes, but with bread and with grape juice and with the still invincible promise of His faithfulness, and His love.

Even after all these years, Jesus still meets us in this place... with the offer of spiritual nourishment that we can never provide for ourselves. He comes to us with the promise that if we will love Him, if we will trust Him, if we will follow Him as best as we can... He will hold our lives in His arms of mercy, and He will never let us go.

That's the promise that He gave that crowd... when He overcame their church picnic disaster. That's the promise that He gives to us... when we open our hearts to the gift which only He can provide. Jesus wants to feed us! Jesus wants to love us! Jesus wants to give His life to us, and fill us with His joy! To that I say, "Bon appetite!" In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!