

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 Luke 9:1-6, 10-17 July 10, 2016
The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

On the Road With Jesus
AT SUPPER

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There were a lot more people there that day than anyone had planned for. The people had come from near and far to hear the Word of God. When it came time to eat, the bread was taken up, a blessing was said over the bread, the bread was broken, and then the bread was distributed for everyone present to eat. Because there were so many people there that day, it took some time for everyone to be served.

And then, everything stopped. One of the men who was distributing the bread came up and said something to the man in charge. He, in turn, gave the man some directions and the man hurried off. After a while, the serving of bread started up again and everybody got something to eat.

No, it wasn't in a deserted place near Bethsaida on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. This happened in a small Presbyterian church in a village in southeastern Mexico. The host pastor asked me to him celebrate and administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. There was a very large crowd at church that morning. When it was time for communion, the pastor and I led our respective parts of the liturgy. Then the elders came forward and took the plates of bread and cups of juice to serve the congregation. As I said, at one point everything stopped. After we waited for quite a while, the elders came out with more bread and juice and finished serving the people. After the worship service was over, I found out that the bread and juice had run out because there were so many more people at worship than expected. The pastor had sent one of the elders down the street to the neighborhood bodega to buy more bread and juice. That's what we were waiting on. The feeding of that crowd in a church in southeastern Mexico might not have been miraculous but, in the words of the host pastor, it was "histórico!"

We come to our Lord's table this morning after hearing the story about Jesus feeding the 5000 men (so maybe the total number of people was even greater). According to the "Directory for Worship" of our Presbyterian Church, "In this meal the Church celebrates the joyful feast of the people of God, and anticipates the great banquet and marriage supper of the Lamb. Brought by the Holy Spirit into Christ's presence, the Church eagerly expects and prays for the day when Christ shall come in glory and God be all in all. Nourished by this hope, the Church rises from the Table and is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God's mission to the world, to pro-

claim the gospel, to exercise compassion, to work for justice and peace until Christ's Kingdom shall come at last."¹

According to Luke's story, Jesus' disciples have been "on the road" on their own. He gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases. He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere. (Luke 9:1-6)

On their return, the apostles told Jesus all they had done. Luke doesn't tell us what Jesus was doing while the twelve were out on the road, but we can safely assume he was doing the same thing — bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere he went. When the apostles came back, all thirteen of them were probably ready for some R&R. So, Jesus took them on a private retreat to the seaside town of Bethsaida, hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. Time for a little well-deserved break! But the crowd wouldn't let them rest! Luke tells us that Jesus continued ministering to them — he welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who needed to be cured. (Luke 9:11)

Dr. Wellford Hobbie was a much-beloved professor at Union Seminary in Richmond. He taught us preaching and worship and Presbyterian Church government. Wellford was a demanding professor, but also a kind and gentle man who offered pastoral care to us seminary students at the same time he was marking up our feeble attempts at sermons. Wellford had a wealth of experience as a pastor in the church before he came to teach at the seminary. What he taught us rang true — he had been there and done that in the church. One day he talked to us about the "interruptions" of ministry. "You will be in your study with your entire day planned out," Wellford said. "You're going to spend two hours on sermon preparation, an hour on getting the session agenda ready for that night's meeting, etc., etc. However, someone will stop by and want a word with you, and that word turns into forty-five minutes. Someone else will call with a question and that question uncovers a deeper concern that requires your attention, etc., etc." I remember Wellford telling us, "Don't think of those moments as interruptions of your ministry. Those moments **can be** your ministry." Of course, Wellford admitted, you still have to get your sermon written, the session agenda planned, etc., etc.

The crowds that followed Jesus and the apostles that day to Bethsaida could easily have been seen as "interruptions." However, Jesus took the opportunity to continue his ministry by welcoming them, preaching to them, and healing them. And then he did something else . . . he fed them.

But he didn't do it all by himself. Sure, he made it happen. Someone asked me this week, "How did he do it?" I answered, "v. 16 — And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd." That was the best answer I could give.

Did you notice what Jesus did with the bread and the fish? He didn't tell the disciples to get out of the way and let him do it all. Instead, after telling them, "You give them something to eat," he helped them do that very thing. The disciples realistically

pointed out, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish — unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.” But Jesus took what they had and helped them do what needed to be done — feed the people.

Perhaps what Jesus did with the bread and fish sounds familiar — he took, blessed, broke, and gave.

In Luke’s story of the Last Supper, he tells us, “[Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” (Luke 22:19)

In Luke’s story about the two men on the road to Emmaus late on Easter afternoon, he tells us, “When he was at table with them, [Jesus] took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” (Luke 24:30)

In his words of institution and instructions about the Lord’s Supper, the apostle Paul says, “. . . the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” (1 Corinthians 11:23-24)

When Jesus fed the 5000+ at Bethsaida, it wasn’t necessarily “the Sacrament of Holy Communion” but there is certainly something sacramental about what he did with the loaves and the fishes. Luke lets us know that the breaking of bread wasn’t an isolated act — there was welcoming and preaching and teaching and healing. Later on, in his second volume of his work which we call The Book of Acts, Luke describes what life was like among the early Christians: “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” (Acts 2:43-47)

In his commentary on this story in the gospel of Luke, Fred B. Craddock notes that “It is important, then, to keep in mind that the feeding of the multitude was an event within and not isolated from a full ministry to a range of human needs. When the church appropriated this story for liturgical use, as bread and fish symbolism and the eucharistic language (took, blessed, broke, gave) indicated it did, the liturgy was not separated from the larger ministry to other needs. The Lord’s Supper was joined to a full meal in which those who had shared with those who did not. Apart from feeding the hungry, the Eucharist becomes a ritual detached from life, just as feeding the hungry, apart from the Eucharist, is not fully satisfying. One lives by bread, yes, but not by bread alone.”²

In a few minutes, our elders will hand you trays of bread and cups of juice. In the tradition of this church, you will eat the bread and drink the juice individually. But that doesn’t mean you are having a private communion service, just between you and Jesus. Personal, yes, but never private — the same can be said of our faith. The elders take the trays and hand them to the people sitting on the ends of the pews. But you pass the bread and cup among yourselves. You serve one another. That’s one way we celebrate

“communion” — communion with each other and communion with our Lord. As the apostle Paul says, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is not a communion in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16)

This sacrament of Holy Communion also must not be a private act isolated from everything else we do here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. In light of Jesus telling his disciples, “You give them something to eat,” think about how this sacrament relates to our mission and purpose as a church. To paraphrase Dr. Craddock, “Apart from feeding the hungry, [Worship — the Helping Hands Food Pantry — the Summer Reading Program — the bicycles for Zambia — our support for Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries and Feed Our Hungry Children/Backpack Ministry — St. Nicholas Project — Presbyterian Enrichment Program — LOGOS — Prayer Shawl Ministry — and the list goes on and on] the Eucharist becomes a ritual detached from life.”

Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” Then he feeds us himself with the communion of his body and blood so we will have the strength and faith and resources we need to feed others, so many others, in so many ways.

Let us pray: God of our hopes and dreams, we are empty, and long to be filled. We are hungry, and long to be fed. We are lost, and long to be found. Gather us into your love, and pick up the pieces of our lives, just as Jesus gathered up the fragments of the five loaves and two fish. Call us anew to eat our fill and to find our true nourishment in Jesus, the bread of heaven. Amen.

NOTES

¹Book of Order 2015-2017, “Directory for Worship, W-2.4007, Foretaste of the Kingdom Meal,” (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2015), p. 97.

²Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 126.