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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, February 7, 2024  
Matthew 14:13-21  
Feeding the Five Thousand

HOLY GOSPEL .....Matthew 14:13-21, RSV  
*Last week we read of the death of John the Baptist. Now we read of Jesus feeding the five thousand.*

<sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup>As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. <sup>15</sup>When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." <sup>17</sup>They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." <sup>18</sup>And he said, "Bring them here to me." <sup>19</sup>Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>20</sup>And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. <sup>21</sup>And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

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

Our reading begins with the words "Now when Jesus heard this..." Heard what? Heard about the death of his kinsman John the Baptist. Heard about the man's head on a platter and about that appalling deed. When Jesus heard this, "he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart." It was his way, from time to time. Jesus would withdraw to a lonely place, perhaps up a mountain, to pray. He could spend the night in prayer. He could match his sorrow with prayer. But this was not to be. Let us admire Jesus exceedingly for his compassion. He continues in his compassion. He is steady in it. A great throng followed him. When he had wanted to be alone, he was prevented from that by a multitude of folk, with their various ills. They disrupted his plan. Another person might have erupted. He might have cursed and said, "This is too much! This is the last straw! Cannot I have even a moment of peace? Can I not have some quiet time alone to grieve for that good man John the Baptist? Am I to be deprived even of a moment when people are not tugging on me?"

But instead, his pity, his intense pity, continues warm. St. Matthew puts it this way:

<sup>14</sup>As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14, RSV)

As it turns out, not only does Jesus heal their sick, but also he feeds the whole multitude — five thousand men plus women and children.

Martin Luther taught us a great table blessing. It is worth memorizing. That way we need not touch our meal without first giving thanks. Even in a restaurant we can bow our heads and pray Luther's prayer. He builds his little prayer on a verse from Psalm 104 (verse 27). It goes this way:

The eyes of all look to Thee, O Lord, and Thou givest them their food in due season. Thou openest thy hand; Thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing. Lord God, heavenly Father, bless us, and these thy gifts which of thy bountiful goodness Thou hast bestowed on us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Luther, *Small Catechism*, Tappert Edition)

Or something like that:

The eyes of all look to you, O Lord, and you them their food in due season. You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we receive from your bountiful goodness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In this evening's Bible reading, he who feeds the world, he who opens his hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing, and he without whom nothing is that is, feeds a crowd of at least five thousand people. It is a great scene to contemplate.

And it teaches us that in things both great and small, Jesus knows of our needs and he cares. It is a great thing that Jesus was able to heal the sick in that multitude. In that way, he turned life around for some suffering folks. Doctors might not have helped them in the past. But the Great Physician of Body and Soul is able to help them. So, that is a great thing.

But Jesus also cares about smaller things. He cares when it is suppertime, but there is too little food to feed the people. So, he multiplies the loaves and the fishes.

And, of course, food is not always a small thing. Some of the people in the crowd of five thousand might have skipped a meal without too much damage. For some of them, it might even have been good for them to skip supper.

Anyway, they were there of their own free choice. They were not prisoners. They could have left and headed home for supper whenever they pleased. So, for at least some of the people in that multitude, their supper was not a huge deal.

But when we think of all the hungry people on earth, this miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is one of the most promising of all miracles.

The prophet Isaiah once preached a wonderful promise (Isaiah 25). It is a promise that is picked up and repeated in the New Testament. Here is Revelation's version of the promise:

[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4, RSV)

Such a promise is thrilling. When we think of all the pain and grieving and death in this world, it is stirring to look ahead to a time when these things shall no longer be.

But we should add hunger to this list. This evening's Bible passage authorizes such an addition. In prosperous parts of the world, some people can skip a meal for the sake of slimming down. But in much of the world, there is too little food. Even the children wake up hungry and go through the day with so very little.

So, this evening's Bible Reading is a short one — only eight verses — but it is a great reading, teeming with hope for a hungry world. Jesus can do this. Jesus can and will feed hungry people. That is why we should pray with much earnestness, "Thy kingdom come." And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever.