

Bread In The Wilderness.

Text: Mark 8:1-9

Suggested Hymns:

440, 259, 358, 283, 367

- 1) The Example Of Our Lord
- 2) The Desert Of Our Lovelessness
- 3) The Frustration Of Our Longing
- 4) The Power of Our Liturgy
- 5) The Purpose Of Our Life

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Mark 8:1-9, ¹ *In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them,* ² *“I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. ³ And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar.”*

⁴ *Then His disciples answered Him, “How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?” ⁵ He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven.” ⁶ So He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and they set them before the multitude.*

⁷ *They also had a few small fish; and having blessed them, He said to set them also before them. ⁸ So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments. ⁹ Now those who had eaten were about four thousand.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Last Sunday’s Gospel instructed us that reconciliation with a brother who has something against us is neither separable from, nor secondary to, our offering of gifts at the altar of God. We heard in Matt. 5:23-24, ²³ *Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and*

go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

Our relationship with God always has more than one dimension: there is no genuine love for God apart from love for one’s neighbours, and reconciliation with God is of one piece with reconciliation with other people.

Last Sunday’s Gospel strongly reminds us of the words of 1 John 4:20, ²⁰ *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”* It is impossible to love God and hate the brother.

All the people of God love to hear how our Lord so perfectly combined love for God and love for men that they amounted to one act rather than separate and distinct acts.

This is made clear in the Gospel for today, where we are told how Christ fed four thousand people in the desert. The theme for today is *“Bread in the Wilderness.”* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Example Of Our Lord

Our Lord was in the wilderness without bread on more than one occasion. All of us remember Christ’s forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry. When Jesus was without bread, Satan tempted Him, saying, *“If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.”* ⁴ *But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’”*¹

But now, when others are in the desert without bread, Jesus gives a different answer. He does not respond to their hunger, as He did to His own, by saying to them, *“‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,’ so listen to Me as I proclaim that Word to you.”*

Jesus does not seek to turn their attention to “spiritual” food; in fact, He takes the initiative in perceiving their need for bread. ² *“I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. ... And He took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before them. ... So they ate and were filled.”*

These two stories from the life of our Lord show that bread can be a material concern that functions as an idol, replacing God in our devotion; or it can be a spiritual concern that is the vehicle of His gracious generosity to men.

When we become absorbed in the circumstances of our life and livelihood, this concern for our own bread threatens our love for God. Paradoxically, when we respond to the cry of our hungry neighbours for bread, even if that bread is “material,” our concern for their bread expresses our love for God.

Religious people often reverse these values: we call “spiritual” the selfish pursuit of purity in our private relationship with God, but we despise as “material” the claim laid upon us by our neighbour’s needs.

Our Lord neither deifies nor despises bread. He does not force us to choose between love for God and love for our neighbours. Rather, He helps us to choose God and our neighbours over ourselves.

Thus, in His speaking and doing, Jesus holds together love and faithfulness to God with love and service to men. The moment one tries to use the authority of Jesus to say, “*Oh, no, religion is the Word of God, and that is more important than material needs,*” Jesus answers with the feeding of the four thousand.

But the moment one labels the love of God old-fashioned and irrelevant, claiming that the only meaningful religion is to feed the hungry, Jesus answers with His response to Satan in the wilderness, “***Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.***”

Christ’s concerns expose the shallowness of any debate in the church about the Gospel versus the social gospel. There is not the slightest warrant in our Lord’s ministry for our tendency to set Word and sacrament, the church’s life and the Gospel message in opposition to the care for the world’s poor and the starving millions.

Not only is this dilemma utterly inconsistent with the life and teaching of Christ, but prolonging the argument on those terms helps neither our love for God nor our service to our neighbours.

2. The Desert Of Our Lovelessness

For to know that there is to be no separation between love of God and love of the brother exposes our predicament without altering it. We know how things are

to be, and we even long for them to be that way; but this knowledge and this desire do not produce in us this unity of love for God and for our fellowmen.

The Epistle for today² describes our situation. We are by nature “*slaves of sin.*” We love neither God nor our fellowmen, and if we arrive at the place where we love God or love our neighbours, our natural tendency is to regard the two as mutually exclusive and to substitute one for the other. Either we love God and remain callous to the needs of others, or we love men with a devotion that seeks to make the love of God irrelevant.

The same Epistle goes on to say, ²² *But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God ... the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*³

By baptism into Christ, by faith in Him, and the power of His death and resurrection, we have been set free from sin so that now, alongside our own sinful nature, that life of God is working in us to produce deeds of love to our neighbours.

Nevertheless, the old nature remains. Our predicament is made even clearer by the next chapter of Romans, in which Paul describes the continual warfare between our nature and God’s life in us: ¹⁵ *For what I am doing, I do not understand. ... for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. ...* ²² *For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.* ²³ *But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin.*⁴

Our desire to love God and our neighbours is opposed at every turn by our unwillingness, unreadiness, and inability to do so. We cannot escape the judgement of God upon our faithlessness to God when confronted by the needs of our own body — or the judgement of God upon our lovelessness to our neighbours when confronted by the needs of his body.

3. The Frustration Of Our Longing

How we long for that time prophesied by Jeremiah in the Old Testament, in which, says the Lord, *For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish.*⁵

Or, as today's Collect asks, "*O God, whose unfailing nurture provides for all things in heaven and earth: We humbly ask You to keep us from all hurtful things, and to give us those things which are profitable for us.*"

But the "*hurtful things*" remain in us. Our weary souls are not satisfied, and our languishing souls are not replenished. If Jeremiah envisions a garden of paradise, then we are living in a desert. Paradise would be the complete and joyful reality of love for God and fellowmen. Our desert is the absence of love, or the supplanting of one love by the other.

Frustrated by our existence in the desert and tantalised by the dream of being delivered into paradise, we ask the same question as the disciples in today's Gospel: "***How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?***"

The good news of the Gospel is not that God supplants the desert with paradise, but that He comes into our desert that we might have bread. This is the meaning of Christ's incarnation and of the miracle before us.

4. The Power of Our Liturgy

And [Jesus] took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before them."

Where have we heard this language before? Sunday after Sunday the words of institution of Holy Communion remind us that our Lord "*took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to His disciples, and said, Take and eat; this is My body, which is given for you.*"

This is not just an interesting superficial parallel. Rather it conveys to us a profound truth: The bread God gives in the desert of our lives is the bread that is truly food for life, the body of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Like us, the disciples were slow to understand the meaning of the feeding of the four thousand, to receive the life of Christ with faith. Four verses after the conclusion of this miracle, Mark reports that they were again without bread.

We read in Mark 8:16, ¹⁶ ***And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have no bread."*** Jesus had to chide them for their short memories and point out that He had clearly demonstrated His ability to feed hungry people.

Through this they were especially to understand the very point they were missing: that Jesus was giving His life to them, whether in the form of bread for hungry stomachs or, as in the Lord's Supper, food for hungry souls.

In Christ is the life of God; through faith in Him, in the midst of this desert of human life, we join the disciples in receiving from God more than we need to enable us to love God, to love the brother, and to hold these two together as one.

With His life in us we can love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength rather than living by bread alone. We can thereby say no even to our own natural desires. And with Christ the Bread of Life to sustain us, we can love our fellowmen and say yes to their real needs for bread, and for the Bread of Life. We can share our bread with the hungry because it is a matter of life and death.

God's generosity thus cuts the ground from under our petty disputes about the relative value of feeding men's bodies and satisfying their souls. The need to decide between bread and the Bread of Life arises only if there is not enough of either to go around.

But here we are reminded that God gives us more of both than we can consume. *"⁸ So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments."* Here is the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy: *"For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish."*

Seven is the number of fullness. In its Gentile context the story indicates that there is in Christ not only bread for the Jews, the faithful people of God, but bread enough for the whole world.

All four evangelists report Christ's feeding of the five thousand. These accounts are full of reminiscences of the Jewish experience: the miracle occurs in Jewish territory, and Christ's explanations make explicit the parallel with the Israelites' experience of manna in the desert. The twelve baskets left over after the people are fed suggest the church whose twelve apostles fulfil the mission of the twelve tribes of Israel.

But Christ also gives bread to those who are outside the chosen people, just as He cares for the needs of those outside the church. The feeding of the four thousand occurs in Gentile territory. The account is set in a series of narratives that point to Christ as fulfilment of God's gracious promise to the Gentiles.

Those who receive Him as bread, find that there is not only sufficient bread for their hunger, but a full seven baskets remaining for the world.

Thus Christ breaks down the pretension that opposes Jew and Gentile, church and world, as competitors for His generosity. Jesus not only instructs us, He actually feeds us with Himself. And the bread He gives is sufficient for the Jews, with enough left over for the whole church; it is sufficient for those Gentiles who come to faith, with enough left over for the whole world.

We are in the habit of hoarding bread and preserving our lives. We fear that if we give away our substance and ourselves, we lose our lives. The fear is not foolish. To give away one's life is to lose it. But the good news of the Gospel is that God gives us His life. If we trust God for life in Christ, we find in Him life sufficient to sustain us and our brothers.

Because He is our Bread, we need not hoard bread against the day of famine. Because He is our Life, we need not devote our energy to preserving our lives. In Christ's death we have conquered death and can joyfully sing today's Introit: *"Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples! Shout to God with the voice of triumph."*⁶

5. The Purpose Of Our Life

Just as the text of the Lord's Supper enlightens this Gospel, the text of this Gospel enlightens the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Like the disciples, we remain in the desert; our paradise is not fully realised. But in the desert we are given all of paradise that we need: God pours out upon us the gift of His own eternal life when He gives the life of Christ for us and to us.

When God gives us the life of His Son through the hearing of the Gospel and the Sacrament of Holy Communion, He is not simply setting aside His judgement of death on us for our lovelessness over against Him and our neighbours.

The body and blood of His sacrifice are not given only to set our consciences at rest, to strengthen us in our relationship to God or to increase our love for Him. No, that which Christ gives His disciples is to be *"set before the people,"* to be given to all who are hungry.

The same body and blood by which He conquers our death and forgives our lovelessness communicates to us His life — life that empowers us to love God and to love our neighbours.

Both the Gospel and the Lord's Supper teach us that the Bread of Life is inseparable from human bread. This is powerfully expressed in the prayer of Thanksgiving that follows Holy Communion: "*We beseech Thee of Thy mercy to strengthen us thereby in faith toward Thee, and in fervent love toward one another.*" Faith toward God and love toward others are sacramentally linked aspects of a single reality.

Thus we who live in the wilderness need not fall into despair as we measure our own faithlessness toward God and lovelessness toward men against the vision of a paradise in which love for God and love for men are a single experience.

Christ was not content merely to set us an example by His refusal to set His own need for bread above obedience to God, or by His refusal to love God at the expense of meeting men's need for bread.

Rather than just leaving us with a precept and an example, Jesus gives Himself to us in our hunger, and by the gift of His life we have power to love God and to give the brother both bread and the Bread of Life. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matt. 4:3-4

² Rom. 6:19-23

³ Romans 6:22-23

⁴ Rom. 7:15,18, 22-23

⁵ Jeremiah 31:25

⁶ Psalms 47:1