

"We Rejoice That God Is In Our Midst"

Text: John 6:1-15

3/11/2018

We have been talking a lot lately, in both our Tuesday and Sunday Bible classes, about what it means to be in the saving presence of God. In fact, I've gone so far as to say that you can sum up the message of the entire Bible in one word: PRESENCE (i.e., God's presence - ~is saving presence - among His people). The entire Bible is about God being in the midst of His people to provide for them - He was in the midst of Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden, before they sinned against Him; and ever since then He's been in the midst of His Son, the One Who provides the forgiveness of sins.

We see that in today's Gospel, as in the Person of His Son: Jesus Christ, God is in the midst of a large group of people, providing for them. We rejoice that, much as with them, God is in our midst today, providing for us. Let's look at that now together... !

As we do, we return to today's Gospel, where we see our Lord providing food for a huge crowd of people. John writes that:

" ... the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up His eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward Him, Jesus said to Philip: 'Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?'"(John 6:4-5)

Note there that Jesus takes the initiative, saying that He and the disciples are going to provide food for the people ("Where are we to buy bread ... ?"). Philip answers Jesus by saying:

"Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."(v.7)2

and that tells us that Philip didn't harbor any thoughts about being able to feed the crowd, given that two hundred denarii represented about 7 months wages. To the disciples, fulfilling Jesus' desire to feed the crowd had to have seemed hopeless, a hopelessness Andrew expresses when he says:

"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"(v.9)

But of course the situation was NOT hopeless, for Jesus, after telling the disciples to have the people sit down, then:

" ... took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted."(v .11)

With that Jesus fed more than 5,000 people, with just a little 'bit of bread and fish.

We know it was more than 5,000 people that Jesus fed that day because John makes reference to there being 5,000 men who sat down at Jesus' command. If there were women and children included in the crowd, the number would've been greater. Who knows? Jesus may have fed as many as 20,000 people that day. And He fed them all to the full, as John tells us they ate "as much as they wanted," and also that they picked up 12 baskets full of leftovers. As with John's earlier account of Jesus' turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana (ch. 2) - where Jesus had the servants fill the water pots "up to the brim" - so too here the baskets of leftovers were full of excess bread. In the Gospel of John it is clear that, when Jesus provides, He provides in abundance.

But what does He provide? He certainly provides for the physical needs of life. And though we at times find ourselves in situations where it doesn't seem as though we'll have enough (like having a little 'bit of bread and fish with which to feed thousands of people), still, the Lord provides; with Him there's always enough. BUT I don't think that's what John is talking about here. I think he's talking about something altogether different. I

You see, the Feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle of our Lord's that all four Gospel writers relate to us. And while there are similarities in all of their accounts, there are also peculiarities, things that are unique to each of them. For example, John is the only Gospel writer to mention that this miracle took place at Passover time. Again:

"Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand." (r.4)

He does that after mentioning Moses in the previous chapter, in the verses right before those of today's Gospel, where John quotes Jesus as saying:

"If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me."(5:46) j

Passover-time was Moses-time; it was the time when God's people commemorated what God had done through Moses, centuries before, in releasing their forefathers from slavery in Egypt to dwell with Him (God) in their own land. That land is sometimes today called the "Holy Land," and in the days of Israel 'of old' it really was holy, BECAUSE GOD WAS THERE. God dwelt in the midst of His people in the land He gave to them.

And what did He do for them in that land? He took care of them; He protected them; He provided for all their needs. We saw an instance of that in today's O.T. Lesson, where Moses provided bread- Bread that actually fell from heaven - every day for the Israelites to eat. That's what's in the background of John's version of the Feeding of the 5,000 - the context is that of God dwelling in the midst of His people to provide for them, with John's point being that, in Jesus Christ, God still dwells in the midst of His people, to provide for them / to provide for us.

It's interesting that, in John's version of this event, we hear that Jesus took the initiative in feeding the people. In Matthew, Mark and Luke it's the disciples who bring up the issue of feeding them, but in John it's Jesus. Not only that, but in John Jesus speaks of feeding the people in terms of a location, saying:

"Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?"(v.5.Q)

You don't get that in the other versions; only in John. Why? What is John up to in calling attention to that? Perhaps the answer comes later in this same chapter of John - chapter 6, where the people, after being fed by Jesus, said this to Him:

"Our fathers ate the manna (i.e., bread) in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread out of heaven to eat.'" (John 6:31, referring to Exodus 16:4, 15)

with the "He" of course referring to Moses. Jesus responded with this:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father Who gives you the true Bread out of heaven. For the Bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world."(John 6:32-33)

Do you notice the "location language" used there, both by the people and by Jesus? They mentioned bread that was given to their fathers "out of heaven," and Jesus responded by talking about the true bread that comes "out of heaven." That's the answer to the question Jesus posed to His disciples, again:

"Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?" (v.5c)

It's the answer to our question as to why John shows Jesus using "location language" to speak about feeding the people. John uses the feeding of the 5 000 to teach about God's presence among His people in Jesus, for the bread that came "out of heaven" came from God; as Jesus said, again:

" ... it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is MY FATHER Who gives you the true Bread out of heaven ... the Bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, ... "

The Bread that came "out of heaven" was the presence of God among His people, a presence that provided for their every need. That Bread, John says, was available to the 5,000 people who were on the mountain with Jesus in John 6 - NOT in the loaves that Jesus used to feed them, but in Jesus Himself. As Jesus goes on to say: "I am the Bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." (John 6:35) !

Folks, Jesus takes the initiative in John's version of the Feeding of the 5,000 to teach His disciples about the presence of God IN HIM! Jesus teaches His disciples to rejoice that, in Him, God is in their midst.

That's really what set God's people 'of old' apart from other people, the fact that God was in their midst (Ex. 33) - in the Tabernacle later replaced by the Temple; in the blood of animal sacrifice; in the Ark of the Covenant that was in the Tab./Temple and was a part of the ritual of sacrifice. God's people 'of old' rejoiced to have God in their: midst in those sacramental Means of Grace - as friend, not foe; to save, not condemn. God's people 'of old' rejoiced that God was in their midst with His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness.

The same goes for us. You know what sets us Christians apart? The fact that God is in our midst, in the Person of His Son: Jesus Christ. Jesus is the new Ark of the Covenant, the One in Whom God's covenant with all people is fulfilled. As John tells us earlier in his Gospel, Jesus is the "Lamb of God" (1:29), Whose blood was sacrificed on a cross to take away the sins of the world. Jesus is the new Tabernacle/Temple of God, even referring to Himself as that very thing in ch. 2 of John's Gospel (vs. 19-21). In Jesus Christ, God is present - as friend, not foe; to save, not condemn (John 3:17). With God's people 'of old' we rejoice that God is in our midst, in the sacramental loaves of bread that are the wafers on this altar. Through that bread - along with the wine, and also through the water of Baptism and the spoken words of Absolution, God is in our midst with His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness.

And that brings us back to where we began, where we said that you can sum up the message of the entire Bible in one word: PRESENCE (i.e., God's presence - His saving presence - among His people). The entire Bible is about God being in the midst of His people to provide for them. That is what John's version of the Feeding of the 5,000 is about: the saving presence of God in Christ.

Ya know, I'd imagine that when that huge crowd of people gathered around Jesus, hungry, it couldn't have appeared that He would be able to provide for them. But He did. When you gather around the spoken words of your pastor, water, and bread & wine, it doesn't look like those things would be enough to provide for you. But they are. In times both old and new, both good and bad, God is with His people in the Word & Sacraments of His Son. Come to the Sacrament again today folks, and rejoice that God is in your midst -

- in Jesus' ✠ Name,

Amen!