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## *Bread for the Journey*

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*Matthew 14:13-21*

For the past two summers, our senior high youth group has traveled to Kentucky for a week of service and learning alongside neighbors in different regions of the state. We spend a night on the road on either end of the trip, and it's always fun to get to know a different church each time we make these en-route stops. Last year on the last night of the trip, we stayed at a small Lutheran church in Stockton, Illinois, a church I'd found thanks to a national network of young female pastors. We arrived around dinnertime, road-weary, ready to be home, smelling like we'd just spent a week working hard in the Kentucky sun - you get the picture! And the welcome we received at Christ Lutheran was remarkable.

We pulled our three giant vans into the church parking lot and Pastor Chrissy was there on the steps of the church

with her tiny dog, Milo, waving and smiling. Church members had baked us homemade cookies and bars, and the students were excited to hear that the best place for us to sleep that night was on the pews in the sanctuary. That was a new one for us – sleeping in a sanctuary! And even better, Pastor Chrissy gave us no restrictions on where we could play our very loud and very chaotic all-church games, Hogwarts and Contraband. We were tired but all of a sudden we were also very excited for a fun last night of the trip.

As we settled in, I remembered that I'd planned for us to share Communion together that evening as a celebration of our last day on the trip. I'd cleared it with Session, I had a little liturgy prepared – all the prep work on the front end was done. But there was the issue of the elements, the juice and bread. I had grape juice in one of the vans, but I was pretty sure it had been sitting there in the sun all week. Not great. And had I remembered to get a loaf of bread? No, of course not, and even if I had, I probably wouldn't have been able to find it in the mess of 25 people's belongings scattered about. Did I mention we were tired? Communion just wasn't going to happen. Fine – we'd survive without it, and no one would know the difference.

As Pastor Chrissy helped me lock up the church and returned to the manse that evening, I apologized again that we wouldn't have enough time to stay for worship in the morning with her community. We needed to hit the road pretty early. And then Pastor Chrissy asked a question I hope I always remember. "May I serve you all Communion tomorrow before you leave?" My eyes teared up - she didn't know that I'd just nixed my plan to serve Communion that night, and she couldn't have known just how much I was craving that bread and juice, just how much I knew it would send us off in the morning with just the perfect tone. I nodded. "We'd like that very much."

The next morning, we circled up around the chancel, still wiping the sleep from our eyes. Pastor Chrissy reminded us that we are all beloved children of God, that God delights in us, that the bread and wine she was sharing with us was to be bread for our journey ahead. She took me along with her as she shared the elements with each person. I'd whisper the person's name, and she'd serve them. "Izzie - Emma - Victor - Laura Lee - the body of Christ given for you." I hadn't seen our rambunctious group quite so still during our week in Kentucky. We knew something holy was happening. We were being

filled, body and spirit. And then Pastor Chrissy sent us forth to be bread for a hungry world.

This was generous, abundant hospitality. We weren't just fed from our visit to Christ Lutheran Church in Stockton, Illinois. We were filled. And we were sent out, trusting that the Spirit was going ahead of us.

This is what Communion is – generous hospitality from the most gracious host, a feeding and a filling, in both body and spirit. Communion is nourishment for the road that lies ahead for each of us – roads, in our case that morning in Illinois, both literal and figurative. We are sent out to share the abundance we've received.

Hospitality – abundance – feeding – sending out. Do you hear the resonances with the story we just heard, the feeding of the multitude? This is one among so many stories that help to shape our understanding of what we receive at the Communion table each time we celebrate the sacrament together.

This feeding story is the only miracle that happens in all four gospels. It was a favorite of Christians in the early church – there's so much writing from all across the

centuries about this story, this miracle of abundance. It's one of the Jesus stories that we teach children when they are still very young, and it's one of the Jesus stories that likely sticks with us through our own stages of life.

Because the story is just that good – it is a story about a God who provides abundance for a hungry world. And it is a story about a God who invites us in to be filled, and sends us out to do the same.

In Matthew's account of this story, the version read for us a bit ago, it's helpful to back up a bit. A lot has been happening with Jesus and his friends. Right before this scene comes a story we do not typically spend much time on, because it is difficult and violent. It is the multilayered story of John the Baptist's death at the hands of King Herod. And it happens during a dinner banquet. The scene illustrates what happens when power goes unchecked, and when that unchecked power leaves violence and death in its wake.

And so, Jesus's disciples retrieve John the Baptist's body, care for it and bury it. And then they make the somber march back to Jesus to tell him what has gone on at Herod's perverse banquet.

Jesus, as he sometimes does, tries to slip away for a moment of peace and quiet, and perhaps for a moment of processing the fresh grief of having lost a beloved one. But the disciples, as they sometimes do, interrupt with a question. They're asking a good question, the kind of question their teacher has taught them to ask all along. "There's a crowd, Jesus, and these people are hungry, and don't you care about hungry bodies? Let's get them out of here to find some food!"

But they don't get it quite right at first – they want the people to go away and buy some food for themselves. I like to take the less cynical approach here and imagine that the disciples are asking this in the most generous way possible – Jesus, these people are hungry, we don't want them sticking around hungry just because they don't want to miss whatever you're about to say. Can we just take a quick minute for them to go into town?

But Jesus, of course, flips things upside down. "No – no need to go into town. We've got all that we need right here." This is maybe where the disciples get irritated. "No, we most certainly do not have all that we need right here. We counted. Five loaves of bread. Two measly fish." Maybe they're thinking Jesus has started to lose it.

But again – Jesus with the flipping things upside down – “Just bring me the food.” The crowd sits down. He takes the loaves, blesses them and breaks them, and gives the food to the disciples to disperse. And you know the rest of the story – “and all ate and were filled.”

On our junior high trip this past week, I shared this story with the group, and a particularly astute 8th grader asked if maybe it wasn't such a wild miracle after all, if Jesus maybe just cut the bread and fish up into very small pieces, enough for everyone to get a little piece. Haven't you wondered the same about these so-called miracles of multiplication? So we talked it out and decided that really the miracle isn't just that people get fed, but that people get filled. It's not just a morsel of food; it's that feeling of being filled to satisfaction. It's bread enough for the journey. Jesus and his friends and followers still had much to accomplish, much to see and do, and they needed nourishment. The miracle is that they are all filled – more than enough – bread for the journey. The violent banquet they have just heard about at Herod's table makes way for the life-filled banquet of Jesus, where everyone has what they need. This is the kind of banquet we celebrate when we come to the Lord's Table.

Communion is one of those moments where story after story is evoked – the feeding of the multitude is one among many. Passover, manna in the wilderness, God’s gracious presence with the people through the generations, the Last Supper, the heavenly banquet in which all will be united with God. We could do a full sermon series on the connections between Communion and any one of these stories – the resonances are remarkable. But today we have this one story of Jesus feeding hungry people, creating abundance in a world of scarcity. Jesus feeds these people regardless of whether they’ve proven themselves, regardless of whether they’ve demonstrated their hunger or proven that they are in need. All they had to do was show up ready to receive nourishment.

And did you notice who actually does the feeding? It’s the disciples. Jesus hands the multiplied food to them and sends them out. We are to do the same. We are to join in the great circle of receiving and sharing nourishment, of receiving and sharing God’s abundance. And it all begins at this table.

In the words of our denomination’s Directory for Worship: “The Lord’s Supper enacts and seals what the



Word proclaims: God's sustaining grace offered to all people. Even those who doubt may come to the table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ."

A few weeks ago, we stayed at Christ Lutheran in Stockton again on our way home from Kentucky with our 27 senior highs. Again, Pastor Chrissy greeted us at the doorway, this time with Milo and a new dog, Snowy. Again, we slept on those old wooden sanctuary pews and then woke up in the morning to receive the blessing of Communion, circled around the chancel. "Jace - the body of Christ given for you. Olivia - the body of Christ given for you. Tullah - the body of Christ given for you." We were brought back into that great big circle of receiving and sharing nourishment, receiving and sharing grace, receiving and sharing abundance. That bread was the last thing we ate before we hit the road back to Minneapolis. It was bread for the journey - it sustained us to head back home, where we'd bring all that we'd learned and experienced back into our everyday lives. The cycle of God's grace, enacted here at this table.

When you come to the table today, whether this table here in the sanctuary or the table where you are gathered to

worship via livestream or our broadcast partnership on Sunday afternoons, I hope you remember a few things as you partake in that ritual.

I hope you remember marvel at the gifts of God's abundance in the world around you. I hope you remember that you are sent forth to feed and be fed. I hope you remember that though none of us comes to this table entirely worthy of the gifts we receive here, we all come invited by the most generous host the world has ever known.

As I've thought and prayed about Communion in preparing for this morning, a favorite poem of mine, by Indigenous poet Joy Harjo, has been stuck in my heart and mind. The poem is called "Perhaps the World Ends Here." I invite you to listen, remembering this table, and remembering Jesus' generous feast of abundance. And I invite you to listen, remembering all the tables of our lives where we receive and share gifts of abundance.

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

Amen.