

Today we begin a five week worship and sermon series, entitled, "Renewing Connections". Over today and the month of August, we will move, whether we like it or not, out of summer mode and into the "back to school" period. In many ways we really begin a new church program year today and this week as we join together in the fun and vitality of VBS! At the same time lots of people are hard at work making final preparations for the startup of many church programs and activities; in Sunday School, PW, Youth Group, Friendship Fellowship, in Music Ministry, in our focus on supporting and caring for each other in DeaconCare, in our commitment to serve God in God's world through all manner of missions and ministries; and in exciting preparations to launch a significant new opportunity for faith development and spiritual growth in the Program: TOGETHER ON WEDNESDAYS. With all this going positive and proactive activity underway it is a great time for us to take stock of just how well we have been expressing our vision and mission as a church. How have we been doing in our desire and intention to be connecting to God, to one another, to the needs of all our neighbors and to the future as we live out our calling as the Body of Christ. This is a time to remind ourselves that we plan and intend to live by Christ's WORDS - Worship, Outreach, Relationships, Discipleship and Support. Five weeks, five Sundays, each week we will focus on one of these five words. We will celebrate ways and places where we are expressing our Mission and Vision faithfully and imaginatively and we will have cause to ask ourselves how we can better help one another express our faith and our love for God and God's world in all that we will do and be in the weeks and months to come!

You could compare what we are doing here to the return of the NFL players to training camp following the end of the labor dispute between the players and the owners. Not that we were ever locked out, but with the season right in front of us with all its possibilities and potential, now is the time to get back in shape, to be focused on the new season and all our goals, to reconnect with all our team mates, to practice the things that we know well and which come quite naturally to us, to brush up and yes to improve some skills, to figure out the playbook that God has for us to follow and to be clear about the roles that we each are required to play in order that the entire team can thrive and grow as we serve God together.

To add some further meat to this bone or as a scattering of cheese on a vegetarian dish, a weekly Devotional Guide will be available ahead of each Sunday. This Guide will offer the weekly scripture readings, and some comments and observations on them, some questions to think about and a prayer or other material to help us respond to God. Copies of Weeks 1 and 2 are available from the narthex today and online.

The incident at the heart of today's Gospel Reading, the feeding of the 5,000, is one of only a relatively few incidents in the Galilean ministry of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels. The writers of each of the four Gospels relate the story with their own color, flavor and understanding. There can be a temptation to merge together all four versions of this story rather than deal with each of them directly. Today, my intention is to deal with the version of the story found in the Gospel of Matthew.

All three of the synoptic Gospels, Mark, Luke and Matthew, place this incident in the immediate aftermath of the news of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod the Tetrarch. Unlike in the other two synoptic Gospels the writer of the Gospel of Matthew doesn't just place the feeding of the 5,000 in this spot in his chronology, he sets out to deliberately connect these two events together, let's investigate why this was done, and how this influences how we are to respond to this incident.

The first way in which the Gospel writer links these two events is by painting a contrast between two meals, two functions, two parties. Help me if you would, by thinking about the grandest, most lavish, extravagant party that you have ever attended. Maybe you recall a family occasion, a wedding, a birthday,

an anniversary party! Maybe you attended this party here in Rock Hill or in Charlotte or New York or Washington DC or on a beach in Hawaii or under the stars in Paris. Maybe you attended this grand event as its host or as a guest or as the caterer or a waitress or a hired singer or musician or comedian or bouncer? Maybe as the party unfolded you started to work out, with the help of some of the other guests how much the party must be costing, or maybe, if you were the host, you already knew!

During the 2005 trial of Dennis Kozlowski, former CEO of Tyco, in which he was convicted of crimes related to his receipt of \$81 million in unauthorized bonuses and other financial irregularities the jury was shown an expurgated videotape of a lavish party he threw which cost him over \$1m. The video of the party pictured women in gauzy gowns, half-naked male models and even singer Jimmy Buffett, hired it was claimed for \$250,000 to entertain 75 guests at a luxury venue on Sardinia. There were gladiators at the door, Adonis look-alikes posing by the pool, toga-clad beauties scattering rose petals and an archer whose flaming arrow lit up a message: "Congratulations Karen & Dennis." "It's going to be a fun week," Kozlowski had told guests arriving at the reception on June 11, 2001, "Eating, drinking, whatever. All the things we're best known for." The same year Kozlowski threw the birthday bash and sent Tyco half the bill, he told his stockholders of a "relentless push to reduce costs."

Just such a party had just been thrown in Galilee by Herod the Tetrarch. There was food and wine and music and dancing and carousing and seduction aplenty. And for some extra special fun and as a cover up of Herod's illegitimate relationship with Herodias, following her daughter's "dance", John the Baptist was murdered, the gruesome details of how this happened and the horror of it is described at the start of Chapter 14.

The Gospel writer intends for us to compare and contrast this "me, me, me; money, money, money; wine, women, wantonness" party of Hedonistic Herod with the simpler, meaningful, giving and sharing meal and party hosted by Generous Jesus when 5,000 plus were fed and satisfied.

Herod's banquet and lifestyle is about taking, getting, gaining, grasping;

Jesus' banquet is about sharing and giving, principally giving away, not getting.

Herod's banquet is about flaunting power and wealth and luxury to win favor and extend his patronage;

Jesus' banquet is about responding to the urgent practical needs of those who had come seeking solace and healing and help.

Herod's banquet is about imprisoning and subjugating, about the threat of terror and the use of grotesque violence;

Jesus' banquet is one of friendship, fellowship, sharing, participation.

The Gospel writer intends for us and all his readers to get this comparison and be convinced that truth and goodness lie in the sharing of five loaves and two fish with a large crowd rather than with caviar with the powerful. The implications of all this for our life as a WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY, include the following:

Christian worship is never about fear or coercion or force, never about keeping up with or in with the powerful at the expense of the least and the last. Instead Christian worship is offered openly, communally, truthfully; and since it is offered to God the Creator and Sustainer and Savior of all there is always, always space for all.

In Worship what we offer should be our all. At a human level we or others may choose to view or imagine that what we offer is small, no more than five loaves and two fish, BUT that doesn't matter, what matters is that in WORSHIP we offer our all to God fully and freely. The promise of God is very simple and stark, God is able to receive, accept, welcome, transform and multiply what we offer, especially to the extent that we offer it fully, gratefully and faithfully. And when this happens a huge harvest occurs and flows over, our praise of God spills over into lives of true service and concern for others.

Think about it this way...

"We have nothing to offer but five loaves and two fish", is what the disciples said to Jesus.

You and I, our mumble and grumble might sound like this,

"We have nothing to offer except our compassion, our desire to love God and serve others..."

We have nothing to offer except our education, our life experience, our emotions, our minds, our desire to serve...

We have nothing to offer except our faith, our wealth, our means, our resources, our hearts..."

Right now I hope you are saying to yourself something along the lines of, "Well Pastor, when you put it like this, we see, we really do see, we have so much not so little that we can and need to offer to God in WORSHIP."

The second way in which the Gospel writer links the two events the death of John and the feeding of the 5,000 is also very clever, simple and very worth noticing. When Jesus heard of the news of John, what did Jesus do? Verse 13 tells us that "Jesus withdrew... to a deserted place by himself". What had been the message of John the Baptist? Why just that, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, repent and prepare the way of the Lord." As we know Jesus was very attracted to this message from John and was willing to be baptized by him, and immediately following to enter into the wilderness of temptation and testing. It is no accident that Jesus, hearing of the death of John at the hand of Herod, immediately put John's message into practice. Hearing of John's death, Jesus seeks all that He might gain from the wilderness, so beloved by John as a place where it was possible to have the correct focus and gain perspective, God's perspective.

When it comes to WORSHIP we ought to note that we are called to give our complete focus to God, to lay aside and set aside all distractions in order that we can fully and freely bless and honor and praise God, who alone deserves to be worshipped and adored. Of course, even as Jesus sought to do this the crowd interrupted and sensing their needs, for wholeness and healing, for hope and comfort, Jesus shared His compassion with them. Jesus had the same compassion for the needy as Jesus had for God. In other words Jesus' worship and so our worship, will always cause us to worship God in the serving of others, in seeing to their needs, in sharing compassion and love and grace with all – this is what it means to worship with our whole lives, with our hearts and minds, with all we are.

The reality is that there are many more than 5,000 who lack the basics for life: food, water and shelter. Even in our own country and city we are aware of those who struggle with necessities. Aware of what it means for us to WORSHIP God and so be aware of the needs of others is what propels us as a church to support groups and agencies who seek to respond to such needs locally, regionally, nationally and globally. We also continue to understand the actual reality of the needs in our own community in order that we can look to continue to offer our most faithful, effective response. I found an interesting quote

from Gandhi on this topic, not from young Jim, now home from India but in some written materials. He said, "The earth provides enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed."

To WORSHIP God means to not worship ourselves, to not worship our ease or needs, to not worship wealth or money, prestige or power. There are other evangelists out there, not evangelists of Jesus Christ, who invite us to WORSHIP the market or their preferred economic system or some concept of corporate globalism. These evangelists promote a view that claims that a rising tide of economic success will lift all boats. Our WORSHIP of God asks us to resist such false promises and to go behind such rhetoric. As has been reported in just the past week, even in the current downturn, the gap between the means and wealth of different ethnic groups has increased. There is also the continuing and growing disparity between the remuneration of CEO's and Senior Executives compared to the pay of average workers in their corporations. It seems that that in any economic tide, rising or falling, rather than lift all boats, all that is getting lifted are yachts!

Spiritually and faithfully, there is a lot at stake when we WORSHIP God. Likewise practically and economically, socially and politically, emotionally and intellectually there is a lot at stake as we WORSHIP God. When it comes time for the 8:45 or the 11:00 a.m. Service next week or any week we need to be willing to acknowledge just how much is at stake: our identity as the people of God, as the community of Jesus Christ, as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As we WORSHIP, as we offer our all to God, we need to be better aligning the words we say, the hymns we sing and the prayers we offer with how we will WORSHIP as we live throughout the rest of the week.

People of God, be encouraged then to offer to God in WORSHIP who you are, all of you, and everything you are and do and can be, and allow God to receive you, accept you, take you, bless you, break you, and give you back as part of God's gift to the world, that our worshipping and our living become one for the sake of God and for the sake of God's purposes in the world, that we and all people might discover the gracious compassion, and the generous provision that God keeps on offering to us, not in the Palaces of Herod but in a excited crowd on a hillside, receiving as from our Master's hand bread and fish, healing and hope, life, love and laughter.

Praise God from whom ALL Blessings flow! Amen.