

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 7, 2022

Mark 6:30-44

The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

There's a few lines in here that just grab me, and one of them is “After everything has been prepared, He invites the disciples to get everyone who's gathered to sit down on the green grass.” I was reflecting on that this week, what it looks like to sit down on the green grass. It took me back to spring of 2020. I am not sure exactly where you were at that time. Maybe you're here in Memphis. Maybe you've gone off to some other place. We were a few months into the pandemic, and everyone was keeping to themselves in their homes. There were lockdowns going on, right.

A few months after that, as the summer began, gathering started happening, at least for me and my friends, right. Now they didn't look like this. That we weren't all packed in together, right. The text started going around, and people would say ‘Hey, we're going to get together for an early dinner. It's going to be light. Bring whatever you want. We're just going to sit out on the lawn now.’ Remember one day in particular in the side yard of my friend's house. They had a little picket fence around it, and we had about fourteen folks seated in the grass there. Each of us had brought different elements with us, right. My staple was pimento cheese, and some wheat thins. Others who are more creative would spend time baking something delicious, right. They would cut it up, and what we would do is we would pass it to each other, right. We take what we

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needed, and then we'd sit there on the grass and eat together. We'd spend all evening together, and then the sun would go down and we'd stay out there. Maybe we had a bottle of wine, or maybe we were just enjoying the conversation. We sat there until it got late, and then the next day the text chain went out again, and then the next, and the next, and before we knew it this gathering for us became a regular thing. Maybe you did something similar with your friends.

I was finishing up a good book that I read recently by Shauna Nequist. The title is *I Guess I Haven't Learned That Yet*. For me, it's top five titles. It's all these lessons, and she talks about what it looked like to be in the midst of the pandemic in New York City, particularly on the seminary grounds where she lives. She said that they would gather, and they'd throw out blankets, and the kids would be running around, and they would keep their distance from each other, but they would sit there, and they would talk because everyone needed to be near another. It didn't have to be fancy, right. It wasn't the nicest prosciutto. We didn't bring out our nicest things, charcuterie boards, that would rival any at Knife Bird. No, we just brought what we had, and we enjoyed the time together. I was thinking about that this week. What it looked like for us to gather simply and just to be with each other.

What we have here is a group of disciples who've been doing a really faithful job of following Jesus. They've gone out. They have taught. They've connected with people. There have been miracles that have happened. People have been healed. People have had their spirits renewed and their souls made alive again. They come back, and they start talking and sharing the stories of this. There's also a fatigue, right. Jesus knows this. When we are pouring out ourselves in care for another, we need to take time to rest and recover and to be rejuvenated by the Spirit of God. He says to them, "Let's go away to another place." The best laid plans don't work out because as they make their way, so does the group. What they have been doing draws people so strongly that they beat them to this quiet place where they are going, and then it gets late in the day. Jesus has been preaching for a good while, and then the disciples have to answer a question that the text doesn't ask. What do you do when you're hungry, and you're tired, and you're in a deserted place, and the hour is late?

The disciples decide to skip the question entirely, and say "Jesus, send them off. Cut the preaching. Let them go. They're hungry. We're hungry. They're tired. We're definitely tired. Let them go. The first response of the church, these disciples, is to send people away from them. Instead, Jesus says to them, "Well you give them something to eat." The disciples go and he says "What do you have?" There's five loaves and there's a couple fish. I wonder if that's all there was. I wonder if the disciples went back, and they did the counting, and they said "Well, there's five loaves and a couple fish for them, but we're hungry too. They've encroached on our space. We need something to eat." I wonder if there were some things going on behind the scenes there.

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Whatever happened, they did not believe that what they had to give was enough to nourish the people. So, they gather up the bread and the fish. Then here's another line that catches my attention. "They bring him the loaves," scripture says. "He sits everyone down on the green grass, and then he takes the loaves, and he takes the fish, and then he looks to heaven."

"He looks to heaven." There's something implicit in that a simple nod of Jesus to a power even beyond himself, to what is going to need to happen to feed all of these people. Jesus looks to heaven, and then, what ensues by heaven's favor, a delightful mess of a meal. I don't know about you, but the idea of twelve baskets of pieces of bread, and some bits of the fish. Scripture says, "broken pieces of the fish." Sounds like quite the beautiful mess on that green grass took place.

Some of you all know that a couple weeks ago I took a little road trip. I needed to get out of town, clear my head a little bit and see some friends. I was making contact with some folks that I haven't talked to in a long time. People that are really significant to me. Something you'll learn over time as I collect families. So, just heads up. I have probably like three sets of parents that I would call parents, right. Then I have a handful of grandparents as well. One of them's name, a grandmother of mine, is Gail Hurst. Gail and I have spent a lot of time together. If y'all are familiar with a place called Chautauqua Institute. It's up in New York State. She has a house up there, and we'd spend a good bit of time up there during the summer together, her and her husband and their friends. We'd spend so much time together. So, the last year and a half of not being able to talk to Gail has been difficult for me, right. So, we were connecting for the first time, and I went to her home. She greeted me with a hug, and she wanted to show me. She lives in this new place that we walked around. She showed me the new living room, and the bedroom, and the kitchen, and the office, and all these things that she was really excited about. Then she said, "Can I make you a little breakfast?" I said, "Sure, what do you have?" She said, "You sit down." So, I sat down at the counter, and she said, "What kind of coffee do you want?" She ground some fresh coffee. She made a drip for me. She sat in front of me. She said, "I've got some granola just made yesterday, some almond and cinnamon granola." So, I said, "Sure. I'll take some of that." "how about some fruit?" "I'd love some." "Well, I've had this biscotti that I've been holding on to for a little bit. can we just have a little piece?" "Sure." We sat across the kitchen counter from each other, and I said, "Tell me about life. Tell me what's been happening." Over some delicious granola, and some fresh fruit, and some biscotti that you could just dip in the coffee, and it softened, we connected. We talked about all the things that have been going on in her family and in her life, how difficult it was to move into a new home, to start a new season of life in a new place with new people and a different church.

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It was a kitchen counter, but it could have well been a communion table. We sat across from each other in relationship, and with everything that she sat before me, it reminded me that I was loved and known and cared for. Then she said, “ Tell me about your life. I spent 30 minutes telling her about Memphis, and about y'all, and about this place that we call Idlewild, and about the incredible things that God is doing in the midst of us here. How we're standing kind of on the edge our toes, on the edge of this new thing that God is bringing forth. It's powerful, and it's exciting, and we don't know what it's going to look like. I don't know how we will meet the needs of the people that God is calling us to care for, but somehow, God's going to do that. We drank coffee, and we ate biscotti, and we had communion together.

It strikes me that her hospitality at the table that day reminded me again that I am known and loved and valued.

I wonder if that the message of the table, whether we celebrate it on the first Sunday of the month together, or whether we're seated in a grassy field, is trying to tell us as we share and cup and bread this day.

I wonder if Jesus was here what he would try to communicate to us as we come forward later on this morning and we take the elements. I imagine he would say ‘You are welcome here. you are valued. You are loved. You are known.’

I think what the table is trying to tell us is that there is enough here for every one of us. There's enough love. There's enough grace. There's enough forgiveness. There's enough hope. There's enough provision. There's enough food. There's enough of all of God's good gifts for each of us.

Not only is the table trying to communicate something to us, it is asking something of us. The table of God is asking us to trust that the God of all creation is enough for us.

The table is asking us, compelling us, to proclaim against all other narratives that what we have in our souls is enough before God. That the love, and the energy, and the hope that you have is enough. That even in your weariness, even in your disappointment, you are loved by God. The table moves us, heals us, and it reminds us that we matter, that someone cares, that we're alive. It's an antidote to our isolation and our separation.

Here's the thing. We have some silver before us this day, and some finely cut bread. We have juice that's been prepared, and we'll have ushers that'll serve it later. As you take the elements today, here's what I hope. I hope that you imagine as you go, and take your seat back in

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the congregation, that you're on green grass, and that the meal is with people who you've been compelled to draw close to, and that this for us is not just a meal that we celebrate once a month, but it's the foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus turns to the disciples, and he says to them, "What do we have?" What they think they have is not going to be enough, but what God is able to do through them is more than enough to satisfy all who gathered. My hope for our church is that we will know that we have every bit of what God desires us to have to do the work of caring for people and loving them and inviting them and inspiring them and letting them know that they're known and loved and welcomed. Rachel Held Evans paints this beautiful picture for us. She says, "This is what the Kingdom of God looks like. It's a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. There's always room for more. So, come this day in your hunger. Say yes to the invitation."

I invite you to join me in a word of prayer. Let's pray together.

It can be a kitchen counter. It can be a folding table. It can be served with silver, or it can be served on a napkin. We can be seated on green grass, or in comfy chairs, or on our couch at home.

However, it looks and whatever shape it takes, it is the same meal. God, we are grateful that at this table you tell us that we are loved and welcomed. What we pray for, Lord, is that you would meet us in the places where you know we need healing this day. You would meet us in our angst, and in our worry. You would meet us in our frustration, in our anger. You would meet us in our deepest hurt.

We pray that you would meet us there and offer us something. Offer us bread and cup to heal us and make us new.

We pray that we would know that this meal is one that we share with all disciples in all places.

For we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen One. And All God's people say together, Amen.