**Weekend of Sunday, August 6, 2023**

**10th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 18/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-5**

**Second Reading: Romans 9:1-5**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 14:13-21**

**Sermon Title: *“Grace-filled Provision for All”***

**Theme**

In today’s first reading, God invites all who are hungry or thirsty to receive food and drink without cost. Jesus feeds the hungry multitude and reveals the abundance of God. At the eucharistic table, we remember *all* who are hungry or poor in our world today. As we share the bread of life, we are sent forth to give ourselves away as bread for the hungry.

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-5**

 1Ho, everyone who thirsts,
  come to the waters;
 and *you that have no money,
  come, buy and eat*!
 Come, buy wine and milk
  without money and *without price*.
 2*Why* do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
  and your labor for that which *does not satisfy*?
 Listen carefully to me, and *eat what is good*,
  and delight yourselves in *rich food*.
 3Incline your ear, and come to me;
  listen, so that you may live.
 I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
  my steadfast, sure love for David.
 4See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
  a leader and commander for the peoples.
 5See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
  and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
 because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
  for he has glorified you.

**Second Reading: Romans 9:1-5**

1I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—2I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. *4They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.* Amen.

**Gospel: Matthew 14:13-21**

13Now when Jesus heard [about the beheading of John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” 16Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; *you give them something to eat*.” 17They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” 18And he said, “Bring them here to me.” 19Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

**Sermon**

For the last several years, I have begun our worship services by proclaiming that “You belong here!” And you, the congregation, have been kind enough to play along by responding, “We belong together.” Then sometimes, especially if I see several visitors among us, I will go on to explain what that is. It is not just a simple little gathering ritual we do. It is a proclamation of what we believe, and that, simply put, is that there is one Creator and everything in heaven and on earth is the creation of that Creator and saved from sin and death by his Son, Jesus Christ. Once we acknowledge that that statement is true, then our little gathering ritual becomes a statement of faith.

In these readings prescribed for today, we will find more like that: statements of faith. Statements about God's abundant provision, our call to embrace the gift of grace, and our mission to share that grace with others. They remind us that we are called to be vessels of God's love, grace, and mercy in the world.

I googled “stories of random acts of kindness because of faith” and found a website that had hundreds of inspirational stories: I selected a couple.

* It was my daughter's 1st birthday and I went to purchase birthday cookies and cupcakes. I was so embarrassed when my debit card was declined, that I just left the store. As I was getting into my car, a gentleman who was behind me in line came out and gave me the cookies and cupcakes and said it was on him. I cried and hugged him.
* We were going into Kroger Marketplace one day and saw a gentleman riding in one of the electric scooters the store provides. It was raining and he had a basket full of groceries. I felt this need to help him. So I went over and asked if he wanted help putting his groceries in his car. He happily agreed. I noticed he had a Korean War Veteran hat on so when he asked if I would take $5 for my help, I told him no, his service was thanks enough. He was surprised. I told him to have a good day and took the electric scooter back inside.
* I was visiting a member at TMH in Warren and was riding the elevator with a woman. We barely made eye contact, but I could tell she had been crying. Suddenly, the elevator stopped with a jolt and then froze in place. She screamed, “What is happening?” as she grabbed the walls as if she was bracing for a crash. I assured her, we’ll be fine, and then used the phone in the elevator and called for help. She continued to panic. After I had made the call for service, I invited her to sit down and began talking with her in a calming, reassuring voice. She told me her husband had been in a serious automobile accident and was not doing well. A friend of hers brought her to the hospital because they only had one car and it was now wrecked. A series of possible “if/then’s” flowed from her as she cried. I asked if I could pray for her and her husband and she said I could. I moved over beside her and held her hand and prayed. We talked a little while longer and then maintenance workers pried the doors open and put a ladder up against the floor (we were between floors) and because she was still shaking, I helped her down the ladder. Then I offered her a ride home, which she also accepted. No, I wasn’t wearing a clerical collar, and that I was a pastor never came up.

That last story was mine, of course. I could have told you more stories from my own life. I could have told you stories from your lives, the lives of our members, because I have heard some and am certain we all have them, but often, we don’t give our actions any thought. We have the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ in our hearts and it just naturally flows out of us. And while these random acts of kindness might mean little to us, they might just mean everything to the recipient.

In the First Reading from Isaiah (55:1-5), we, no, everyone, are invited to come and partake in the rich blessings of God. The passage says,

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

This is an invitation to *everyone*, regardless of status or resources. God's invitation is inclusive and generous. It reminds us that God's grace is freely available to all who seek it, and, as in the stories I told you, oftentimes the grace of God is simply offered to people who don’t expect it and are taken aback by it. As people of faith, we are encouraged, maybe even commanded to come to God with open hearts and receive the abundance of His blessings. But then, having received it, send it right back out to be a blessing to others. How are you doing with that? I have had colleagues during my ministry whom I have admired because they are simply kind and patient, generous and non-judgmental. I still keep hoping that I mellow into what I have witnessed them to be.

Whether one is a wealthy respected well-known member of the community, or one who is in constant need and can’t seem to get their life together, God the Father, sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for all. And so I say again, “You belong here. We belong together.”

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans (9:1-5), reminds us of the deep love and concern he had for his fellow Israelites. He expresses his anguish and distress, stating,

3For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.

Paul's love for his people reflects God's heart for all humanity. We are called to have a compassionate heart like Paul, to intercede for others, and to be willing to sacrifice for the sake of their well-being. As believers, we should strive to see the potential for redemption and transformation in every person we encounter.

As an aside, and because people often ask me if the Jews will be saved, I believe Paul answers that question in this passage:

4They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Moving on to the Gospel Reading from Matthew (14:13-21), we are witnesses of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand.

Before we get back to the serious business at hand, I found these cartoons I wanted to show you.

Cartoon PIC

Cartoon PIC

PIC There is a place called Tabgha on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee which is said to be the place where Jesus performed this miracle. Almost all the biblical historical spots in Israel are preserved with a church, chapel, or some kind of marker, and indeed, there is a church called The Church of the Multiplication built there. It was built in 1984, so Jesus was never in that building, but excavation of the site revealed mosaic floors dating back to the 4th century indicating this was the spot where Jesus took the small offering of five loaves and two fish and multiplied it to feed the multitude.

This story teaches us that with God, even our small offerings can be multiplied and used for His glory. It reminds us that God's provision is abundant and limitless. And more than that, in the story, while the disciples are well aware of the huge problem in front of them and oblivious as to what to do about it, Jesus demonstrates what they should have done. Forget about *what they don’t have*, *take what they do have, offer that to God, and let the problem be God’s to solve*. We should take note. We too are not to focus on our limitations or what we lack but to trust in God's provision, and be willing to offer what we have, knowing that God can multiply it beyond measure. The God we worship is a God of abundance, He just wants to work through us.

These passages present us with a challenge and an invitation. We are challenged to embrace the gift of grace and salvation offered by God, and in turn, share that grace with others. We are invited to see beyond ourselves, to love and intercede for others, and to be generous with what we have. Just as Jesus took the small offering and multiplied it to feed the multitude, God can take our humble efforts and use them to bring about extraordinary transformations in the lives of others.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

May we be people who respond to God's invitation, who embrace His grace, and who become channels of His love and provision. Let us open our hearts to receive His blessings and extend them to others. Together, let us strive to make a difference in the world, knowing that God's power and provision are with us. May our lives be a testament to the abundance of God's love, and may His grace flow through us, transforming lives and bringing hope to those in need.

**Prayer**

Gracious God, you are so full of love, grace, and mercy, and through the example of your Son and our Lord Jesus, you want to instill it into us. Continue to awaken in us a hunger for the food that satisfies both body and spirit, and share it with the world you created out of love, who do not know you. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen