

Lectionary 18 Year A 2020
August 2, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Meals these days are complicated. Restaurants are either take-out only or have limited seating. They certainly have become places that we probably don't want to hang around and chat with friends for a few hours.

Weddings and funerals have limited attendance, and meals have become even more limited, or omitted entirely from these events.

Churches are either not gathering at all right now, or if they are, there are no fellowship hours, no potlucks, and no community dinners.

Our book club traditionally gathers for dinner each month as we discuss our books, and we usually hold a potluck in August, but it's just too risky this year.

And even if we choose to cook at home, we still face limited supply at grocery stores and increased prices on favorite items.

And so, meals these days are complicated due to the risks, precautions, and special rules in place to make sure people stay healthy. Unfortunately, we've seen time and again that gathering in large groups and eating together are not safe activities these days. So, when we hear this gospel reading of Jesus gathered with a crowd of over 5,000 people and sharing a meal together, maybe we hear it a bit differently this year. Certainly, it's a story we've heard before, but this year it just feels a little bit different.

Perhaps as we hear this story today, we hear it with a sense of longing—longing for a time when things were more normal. Longing for times when our gatherings weren't so limited or restricted or exclusive. Longing for a time when we could simply sit back and relax without concern for all these things. Our world right now in the midst of COVID seems so different from the world in which Jesus lived and miraculously fed so many people gathered in one place.

But the truth is that Jesus and the disciples knew limits and restrictions and exclusiveness too. Perhaps not always in the exact same way as we're experiencing right now, but there were all kinds of limits and risks around meals in the first century.

Certainly, they had health concerns of their own, with making sure that food was safe to eat. There were also purity laws about lepers and outcasts eating with other members of the community. And this society was deeply divided along socio-economic class lines. The elites ate with the elites, the peasants ate with the peasants, and there was little to no mixing or sharing between communities. There were plenty of rules—both spoken and unspoken—when it came to meals.

In fact, in the passage preceding our gospel reading today, King Herod is hosting one such feast. You see, Herod was throwing a feast for his birthday, inviting his rich and powerful friends. It was a party exclusively for the elites of society, a private gathering that played by all the health and social rules of the day. This may have been a feast of abundance, of only the best food and drink, but this abundance was reserved for only a select few. Those that were not allowed or invited had no share in the abundance that this worldly leader was offering.

The truth is that meals have been complicated for a very long time, maybe even for all time. But we've gotten used to our standard set of health and safety and social rules for our day and age. We have a complicated set of rules around meals—but they often go unspoken. We know things like making sure to cook the chicken until the juices run clear to be sure it's fully cooked. We know that the outside fork in a place setting is the salad fork, and the inner one is the

dinner fork. We know to wait until everyone has been served before taking seconds, and our society tells us that in most cases we must wait for an invitation or at least tell people we're coming before showing up and demanding dinner.

There have always been rules and limits around meals in our world, and now with the coronavirus, we are getting used to a new set of rules. It leaves us longing for something more laid-back, something that we're used to—even if it is just a different set of rules.

Jesus and the disciples knew these health rules and societal limits, but part of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 was the fact that none of these rules mattered to Jesus that day. A meal for 5,000 people would normally take all kinds of planning and preparation. It would require a massive grocery delivery, and a commercial sized kitchen, at the very least. We'd want to make sure we knew exactly who was coming to the meal and make sure that we had enough food to go around.

But none of this mattered to Jesus that day. All he saw was what the disciples had told him: "it's getting late in the day, and people in the crowd are starting to get hungry." And so, the answer was clear—at least for Jesus. It didn't matter how many people were there, in fact, it didn't even matter how much food they had available, Jesus simply sat them down, blessed a few loaves and fish, and instructed the disciples to distribute the food to the crowd. And somehow, miraculously, perhaps, there was more than enough food to go around. From just five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus created an abundance to feed the multitudes.

You see, this is the way it is with God. Where we see limitations and rules, and roadblocks—like the disciples did that day, and like the exclusivity of Herod's party—Jesus sees abundance and opportunity. Out of Jesus' abundant grace, mercy, and love, Jesus saw that people were hungry and ensured that everyone was fed.

Through the amazing work of God, there is always an abundance to share. And so, as we gather near to Jesus and hear the living Word of God, as we share in the Lord's Supper, we can trust that there's a place for us at the table, that all people are invited, all are welcome, and God has an abundance for us to share.

We can trust in God's abundance—abundant food, abundant gifts, abundant love, abundant forgiveness, abundant life. We can trust that there are no limits to God's amazing love and care for us. Even when the world seems to create endless limits and rules and risks, God provides for all our needs, gifts us with abundance, and promises to keep us close for eternal life. The rules and limits of this world will come to an end. The rules and limits of the coronavirus will come to an end. But God's abundance will last forever. As we sing in our hymn of the day, "Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again, pass the Word around: loaves abound!" Thanks be to God for the abundance that God shares with all of creation. Amen.