

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 5-6, 2017
Matthew 14:13-21

“Reformation 500 – The Augsburg Confession The New Obedience: Faith and Good Works”

In the winter of 1990, I had the privilege of traveling to the Holy Land and visited many of the sites that are recorded in Scripture. For me, this really helped the Scriptures to come alive as the place names, topography, and landscape were transformed from mere words and maps into real life. Being there in person to walk where Jesus walked was an amazing experience and a great blessing. One of the places our tour group visited was Tabgha, near the Sea of Galilee. This site marks the place believed to be where Jesus accomplished the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 recorded in today’s Gospel lesson. Like many places throughout the Holy Land, there is a house of worship at this location. Not surprisingly, it is called the Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes. There is a plaque at the entrance to this church that has this inscription: “Jesus, Love incarnate, is constrained to help wherever He sees His children in want and distress. But He waits for empty hands outstretched to Him, wherein He may lay His gifts.” As we consider Jesus’ multiplication of those five loaves of bread and two fish, we come before the Lord with empty hands that are outstretched to Him, trusting that Jesus is more than able to provide for our needs. And receiving good things from the Lord, we are moved to love and serve others even as the Lord has loved and served us. Our summer preaching series on the Augsburg Confession continues as we focus on “The New Obedience: Faith and Good Works.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

It all begins with the terrible news that John the Baptist had been killed by Herod (Matthew 14:1-12). That’s how today’s Gospel begins: “**Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself**” (Matthew 14:13). Jesus felt the pressing need to get away from all the crowds and noise, and just have some alone time. But it is not to be. The crowds with all of their needs and demands hunt him down and are there waiting for Jesus when he comes ashore. How would you feel if this happened to you? I confess that I wouldn’t be feeling very charitable or kind, but this is not Jesus’ response. We are told that “... **he had compassion on them and healed their sick**” (Matthew 14:14). It is Jesus’ compassion that moves him to act as He did, healing the sick and multiplying a few loaves and fishes to feed 5000 men plus women and children. This is the immediate physical need, but there is an even greater spiritual need, and not just of those people gathered there by the Sea of Galilee that day, but people like you and me. That spiritual need runs through the lives of every man, woman, and child throughout history. That need can only be met through the saving grace of Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again that we might be saved from sin and death. In Jesus, we can know for certain that God is for us, not against us, and that nothing in all of creation can separate us from his love (Romans 8:39). With a heart of compassion, Jesus, who is the Bread of Life (John 6), feeds not only our bodies but our souls as well.

What Jesus has done for us opens our hearts and minds to a new obedience. The old obedience is based on pride, fear or anxiety, thinking that it’s our obedience which moves God to love us. This is a relationship with God that is “if/then” – *if* I am obedient enough, *if* I try hard enough, *if* I am good enough, *then* God will love and accept me. The trouble is, we can try to be and do all of these things, but we will fall short. It doesn’t work and leaves us in a constant state of fear and anxiety, wondering where we stand. There is a better way, and that is “because/therefore.” *Because* God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, Jesus, to offer his sinless life upon the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life, *therefore* we have been set free from fear and anxiety. Faith based on “if/then” puts the burden on us and our own efforts, but faith based on “because/therefore” removes that burden because it was carried for us by Jesus. For Jesus’ sake, God is at peace with us and we are now called to a new obedience – an obedience based not on fear and

anxiety, but faith based on thanksgiving and joy, as the recurring refrain from Psalm 136, which we spoke together, reminds us: “... **for his steadfast love endures forever.**” The difference between “if/then” and “because/therefore” is like night and day. The former leads to death while the latter leads to life.

Good works flow out of a faith that is rooted in “because/therefore.” And these good works are not something we parade before God or others as if to say, “Look at me! See what I’m doing!” The focus is not on ourselves, but on the Lord and upon the needs of our neighbor. This is all about that fourth mission practice as we join Jesus on his mission: what good can we do around here? Sometimes the good we can do is so simple and basic that we don’t even have to think about. At other times, the good God is calling us to do may take some figuring out and planning because the need is bigger and more complex. We may need to involve other people who can help do good with us. Whether the need is simple and basic, or big and complex, at the heart of it all is compassion. This is what moved Jesus to heal the sick and feed that multitude with five loaves and two fish. Matthew’s account doesn’t record this, but it is found in John’s Gospel that when the disciples looked at their meager resources to feed such a huge crowd, their response was: “**What are they [five loaves and two fish] among so many?**” (John 6:9). So often that is our response as well. We see only what we do not have, and whatever we do have isn’t enough. It’s never enough. What we fail to remember is this truth born out of Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and fishes: little is much in the hands of Jesus. As that inscription at the entrance to the church by the Sea of Galilee reminds us all: Jesus “waits for empty hands outstretched to Him, wherein He may lay His gifts.”

The good works which spring forth from this new and joyful obedience to the Savior will look different in each of our lives. And here is the really amazing thing: in doing good to others, Jesus reveals that we are actually doing good to him as Jesus himself tells us: “**For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me**” (Matthew 31:35-36). Whatever good we may be permitted to do in this life, these good works are not by accident or happenstance! The Word of God is very clear in this regard: “**For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not because of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life**” (Ephesians 2:8-10). Lutherans *love* those first two verses from Ephesians 2 because they’re all about free and undeserved grace! But let us not forget verse 10 which reminds us that God has created us for good works which flow out of that gift of grace through faith, and that these good works have been prepared for us by God.

Confident that *because* we are loved and forgiven by God for Jesus’ sake, *therefore* we go forth from the Lord’s house to love and serve our neighbor for Jesus’ sake. That is the new obedience. May the Lord help us to do this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.