

Matthew 14:13-21 – Five Loaves and Two Fish – Pentecost 10 – August 2, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

I have always appreciated the 23rd Psalm. We know it well. It is like an old comforting song. But there has also been one line that has concerned me. David says, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” And I guess it is realistic. But it just seems like there is a better place for Christ as our Good Shepherd to prepare His table.

For example, wouldn’t it be nice if Jesus prepared a table for us at some luxury resort, a quiet taverna along the Mediterranean, a quaint pub in Ireland, maybe even Pizza Ranch. I suppose we can all imagine the place we would like to be. But, often, we just don’t find ourselves there.

I want us to notice the connection between this Psalm and our Gospel reading today. Our text is a miracle narrative—the feeding of the five thousand. And it is one that we find in all four Gospels. Apart from the resurrection of Christ, it is the only one that we find in all four. And this should get our attention.

And it has a host of connections to the 23rd Psalm. I hope you heard them as we read the Gospel reading. This is why I had us sing *The King of Love My Shepherd Is* today. There are connections with our green altar paraments as well. More about that later.

And it all starts with a family full of enemies—Herod Antipas, his brother’s wife Herodias, and her daughter Salome—and their opposition to John the Baptist. This is a powerful family—politically speaking. Herod has imprisoned John because John did what a Prophet is supposed to do. He spoke the truth about Herod’s poor leadership and their adulterous affair.

Now, Herod secretly spoke with John while he was in prison. He found him interesting. But he found Salome even more interesting. When she danced for Herod, he made a promise to give her whatever she wanted. Herodias has Salome ask for John’s head. And because of his promise—and to keep his so-called honor—Herod delivers.

The first half of this chapter offers details of John’s death. And really, it is an age-old problem. It sounds a lot like the drama of turning on the news today—sexual immorality and political maneuvering. John told them the honest truth. He spoke the Word of God. And it cost him his life. And this moment signals an escalation of opposition to the establishment of God’s kingdom in Matthew’s Gospel.

And so, as our account begins, Jesus seeks a place alone for contemplation and mourning. Remember that John was likely a close relative. They first met when they were in the womb—as Elizabeth and Mary rejoiced at God’s promises for their children.

So, in hearing this news, Jesus pulls back from public view. He withdrew into solitude to a desolate place. Jesus does this frequently. In times of great trouble, He retreats alone to pray. It’s not a bad idea.

But here, Jesus’ plan doesn’t work out. He can’t get a moment for Himself. The crowds have followed Him once again. And even though the moment is personally difficult, He stops. Give the crowds credit. The world teaches us to fill every moment. We stuff every moment until there isn’t time to think. They have stopped and followed Jesus.

Matthew tells us, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” And Jesus says, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Even now, He gives Himself away.

So, Jesus healed and taught them. He brings the kingdom of God right into their midst. And they stayed with Him in that desolate place until the lack of food became a problem. And so, we see that Jesus continues to bless this crowd—even though some of their motives are selfish—as we will see.

The Disciples are also still with Jesus—near the Sea of Galilee—in the wilderness. There is no food. And the day is over. And so, the Disciples suggest a solution. They look for the easy way out. They should send the crowd away. The crowds can go into the villages and buy food for themselves. And the difficulty passes.

But Jesus has another solution in mind. And it begins with His command for the Disciples to feed them. He says, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

And the Disciples respond practically. And all they come up with is five loaves of cheap bread and two fish. Great solution. Obviously, no one was prepared. The crowds brought nothing. There isn’t even enough food for the Disciples. And so, much like Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, Jesus presents them with this impossible task.

Again, there is trouble all around—enemies—the chaos of the sea, the barrenness of the desert, a poverty of food, and the Herodian family executing the Prophet of the kingdom—opposing Jesus’ purposes in the world.

But everything changes when Jesus finally gets His hands on the bread and fish. The miraculous happens. He prepares His table. Jesus feeds five-thousand men—plus women and children—with five small rolls and two tilapia. Everyone eats.

Now, just this week I heard a mainline pastor say that the miracle---was just sharing. We aren’t usually very good at sharing. And so, Jesus inspired them. The people had plenty of food already. Romans soldiers would even have helped the crowd. See what we can do when we are just nice to one another? But such interpretations point us away from what Jesus actually did—and the true meaning of this miracle.

Admittedly, John tells us that a young boy brought the five loaves and two fish. But Matthew doesn’t even mention this detail. That’s all they could come up with from the whole crowd. Remember, following Jesus was not a trip any of them prepared for. And that wouldn’t even provide a bite for a crowd this large.

It happens like this. Jesus ordered the crowds to sit down in green pastures. He takes the five loaves and the two fish. He looks up to heaven. He speaks a blessing. Then He broke the bread and gave it to the Disciples. The disciples distributed the bread to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied. Jesus provided an overabundance. They took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces. Twelve—the number of God’s people.

No one else on earth could have pulled this off. Jesus is the One who turns this moment of want into a feast. He prepares a table in the midst of their enemies and difficulties. He is the Bread of Life.

Now, it is interesting—after the miracle ends—Matthew records no reaction. We often get to hear about how people react to Jesus’ miracles, but not here. Elsewhere, they marvel. They give thanks. They call Jesus a prophet. But this time the crowd falls silent.

In John’s Gospel there is a complementary picture. There we do get to hear the crowd respond. But they respond in a way that reveals their misunderstanding. They want to make Him king by force. And then—when that doesn’t really work—they just want Him to do it again.

Jesus’ miracle shows that He can supply bread. He can alleviate physical hunger. He has power over His whole creation. But for those with eyes to see, He is pointing beyond that physical hunger to a spiritual hunger—a hunger that He alone can meet. That is the significance of the sign. And for us, it is sacramental.

Remember what the Sacrament is. *The Small Catechism* says it this way, “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.”

That’s a good start. But I really like the Formula of Concord here. The Reformers confess, “Just as in Christ two distinct, unchanged natures are inseparably united, so in the Holy Supper the two substances—the natural bread and Christ’s true natural body—are present together here on earth in the appointed administration of the Sacrament.”

We believe in the real, true, and sacramental presence of Christ. We believe the Words of Christ when He says, “This is my body,” and “This is my blood.” This is not some mere spiritual presence—although the Spirit is very much involved. This is not something symbolic—although we find meaning everywhere in the Sacrament.

It is very important for us to note the intentional sacramental echoes here in the language Matthew uses. He points us forward to the Lord’s Supper. Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, showing that He uses real, ordinary, and material stuff of this earth to work His grace.

He blesses these elements. Jesus looks up to heaven, grounding physical hunger and its fulfillment in a direct, relational dependence upon the Creator. The bread is broken before it is multiplied, an echo of Christ’s own body broken on the cross. Remember that the Sacrament proclaims the death of Christ as a primary function. Jesus then hands the bread to His chosen Disciples to distribute to the crowd in their moment of great need.

The Church Fathers adopted bread and fish as a symbol for Holy Communion. Again, that’s why we have the images we do on the altar at St. John. They understood the sacramental echoes in this miracle. They understood that in this Sacrament, Jesus provides for us. In reality, He provides for the whole person—as we commune with Him—both spiritual and physical needs.

Some call the Sacrament *the medicine of immortality*. It not only cleanses our souls from sin—but is heavenly manna—the bread of angels—which grants and guarantees the resurrection of the body—the same body we have right here and now.

Especially in the Sacrament, which attaches God’s Word to the earthly elements bread and wine—Christ feeds His people with real sustenance that nourishes us mind, body, and soul. He guarantees life even with the presence of enemies and threats all around.

Now, our enemies might be different. We do have enemies in this world. Hopefully we don't encounter too many Herod-types in our age. But sometimes, sadly, they are actually people in our lives. We do try to live in peace with those around us. It is as Paul says in Romans 12, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

And so, we live free from hatred. We put away grudges. We are quick to forgive. We pray for our enemies—even though we can't always control how others treat us—even how others respond to the Word of God—as we see with John the Baptist.

But there are other enemies. Our sinful nature—*the flesh* as Paul calls it—is a real enemy that we battle. Many of our temptations are internal. In Colossians 3, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."

And so, we come to the Lord's Table that is set before us. Here, as we kneel and receive—we find the sanctification we so desperately need. It is as Jesus says in John 6, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Death is also our enemy, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." I like the way Pastor Steven Starke says it in our hymn *Water, Blood, and Spirit Crying*, "Dark the way, yet Christ precedes us, past the scowl of death He leads us, spreads a table where He feeds us, with His body and His blood."

Really, this is why we are here today. Maybe we are not exactly where we want to be in life. But that's okay. Jesus is here for us. And He prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies—in the world, the sinful nature, and death. Here we encounter the miraculous. Christ is truly present. He heals our souls. He makes us new. He gives us strength. And we are nourished in grace.

But there is also a future table that David hints at as well. There is a feast to come in the kingdom of God. We confess this a lot around here. Jesus is even preparing that place for us right now. And the Sacrament is just a foretaste of what is to come.

And so, it is very much what David says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever." In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+