

Sermon August 2, 2026
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Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary: Isaiah 55:1–5; Romans 9:1–5; Matthew 14:13–21

They Need Not Go Away

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The 14th chapter of Matthew places two meals before us.

The first is held in Herod's palace. It is his birthday, with important guests, plenty of food, and every visible sign of power. Yet, the meal is governed by lust, manipulation, pride, and fear of losing face. Before the evening is over, John the Baptist — an innocent and faithful prophet — is dead, and his head is carried into the banquet on a platter (Matt. 14:1–12).

A few verses later, Matthew tells us about another meal. This one is not held in a palace, but in a deserted place. Here, there is no kitchen nor any elaborate feast. There is only grass, a crowd numbering in the thousands, five loaves, and two fish. Yet, this meal ends very differently. The sick are healed. The hungry eat until they are satisfied. And twelve baskets remain.

Matthew places these two tables side by side so we can see the difference between the two kings.

Now, many of you have likely heard and know the second story quite well. There is an equally strong chance that the first is far less familiar. There are several reasons for this. One of them is rooted in our sinful nature: we are inclined to cast ourselves as the righteous rather than the guilty.

Consider how this works in practice. When we watch a film or read a story marked by conflict, we instinctively place ourselves among the heroes. We imagine ourselves standing with the just, resisting what is evil. Rarely do we picture ourselves among the wicked. We just *have* to be the good guys in the story!

This is not accidental. It is the work of the Old Adam, who constantly seeks to minimize his own sin while magnifying the sins of others. He distorts reality so that we appear justified in our own eyes. Thus, almost without noticing it, we assign ourselves the role of the “good” while others become the “bad.”

Returning to today's Gospel, we should keep this principle in mind: not all Scripture is written to us, but all of it is written *for* us. That is to say, in the narratives of Holy Scripture, we are given not only history, but also a mirror in which we are shown ourselves.

So, where do we stand in this account? Are we the hero in *this* story?

Are we the Christ at the second table, whose compassion is infinite and never fails? Do we hold the abundance of creation in our hands? Do we feed thousands in the wilderness by the power of our word? Certainly not so!

Instead, we recognize ourselves elsewhere. At times, we see ourselves in Herod: the desire to preserve our comfort, reputation, and control, even when the truth is silenced, and

others bear the cost. More often, we stand with the disciples, taking stock of what is lacking and asking how the problem might be dismissed. And at other times, we find ourselves among the crowd: hungry, dependent, and unable to provide what we most deeply need.

But the good news is this: Jesus Christ is none of those people. He is the true King at the head of the second table, and His mercy is greater than everything we bring to it.

Matthew tells us, "When Jesus heard [of John's death], He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself" (Matt. 14:13). Our Lord has received news that His forerunner, prophet, and kinsman has been killed. Killed for speaking the truth. Here, the Son of God is not pretending to be human, for He truly is human. He is acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3).

But, still the crowd follows Him. They make their way around the shore on foot, bringing the sick with them. And when Jesus steps out of the boat, Matthew says, "He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick" (Matt. 14:14).

Take note here: the crowd has not yet asked for a meal. They have not organized themselves well. They have not brought Jesus a solution. They arrive carrying bodies that hurt and needs that they themselves cannot fix. Jesus sees them before they say anything.

That matters, because some of you know what it is to come before God without a well-formed prayer. You know something is wrong, but you cannot explain it cleanly. You begin a sentence and stop. You cannot think of the right words. Or perhaps you have prayed the same prayer so many times that the words begin to feel empty. The crowd does not first find the right words. Christ first sees the crowd. His love reaches them *before* they ask for it.

By evening, the disciples look over the same people and see something entirely different. "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late," they say. "Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food" (Matt. 14:15).

Let us stand beside them for a moment. The light is going. Thousands of people are spread across the grass. Even if every nearby village has bread for sale, there is not enough time to move this many people, and probably not enough food waiting for them. Now, the disciples are not entirely foolish. Their assessment does make sense.

The place really is deserted. The hour really is late. Five loaves really are not enough.

The problem is that they have counted everything in the scene except the One standing beside them.

And we, too, certainly count that way. We get a barrage of bills in the mail, and start obsessively running the numbers. We get a diagnosis from the doctor, and begin measuring the future in terms of appointments and probabilities. You may look at a sin you have confessed again and again, and you wonder whether this time it finally says something permanent about you.

Now, there is nothing wrong with math, medicine, planning, or honest judgment. The disciples are not rebuked for noticing that the crowd is hungry. The trouble begins when our limited field of view becomes the whole truth, and Christ becomes little more than a religious afterthought added after the "real" calculation is finished.

Our calculations can be perfectly accurate about what is missing and completely wrong about what His presence means.

The disciples' next words show where that way of thinking leads: "Send the multitudes away."

Sometimes we say that out loud. More often, we say it by letting the phone ring because we know the person calling. We delay checking on the person whose grief has not moved on according to our schedule. We keep a little distance from those whose lives may be a little messy, because we suspect that getting close will require something of us.

And then there are those who send themselves away. You stop asking for help because you have needed it for too long. You hold back from confession because you are embarrassed to name the same sin again. You sit in church while part of you remains near the door, convinced that if everyone knew what was really in your heart, you would be asked to leave.

The disciples continue: "Send [them] away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food" (Matt. 14:15).

They are thinking in terms of the ordinary marketplace economy. If you need something, find the money, locate the seller, and make the exchange. That is how daily life usually works. But, it is not how grace works.

The prophet Isaiah cries out, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat... without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1). The disciples say, "Go and buy." The Lord says, "Come, you who have no money."

We know how to buy our way into rooms. We work harder and become useful. We promise improvement. Then, we bring the receipt and hope it is enough. We try the same thing with God. We bring Him our sincerity, our church attendance, our regret, perhaps even our misery, and somewhere under it all is the hope that we have finally brought enough to deserve a place.

But the people Isaiah calls have no money. The crowd in Matthew has no food. The disciples have no answer. There is no transaction to complete.

Then, Jesus says, "They do not need to go away" (Matt. 14:16).

Nothing visible has yet changed. The sun is still setting. The hunger is still real. The bread has not yet been multiplied. Jesus does not make the need smaller. He makes the dismissal unnecessary because He Himself is there.

When shame tells you to leave before anyone notices how hungry you are, hear Him: "They do not need to go away." When your conscience tells you that Christ must be tired of you by now, hear Him: "They do not need to go away." The one place the contrite sinner does not need to go is away from Christ. He does not keep sinners near because sin is harmless. He keeps them near because He has come to bear it. He does not overlook the hunger. He has come to feed.

He does not call the guilty innocent by pretending the guilt is not there. He will take the guilt into Himself and answer it in His own body.

Then, He turns to the disciples and says, "You give them something to eat" (Matt. 14:16).

They look down at what they have. "We have here only five loaves and two fish" (Matt. 14:17).

That word "only" comes easily to us. Only this much money. Only this much time. Only this weak faith.

This is where the story finally puts us in our proper place. You are not Christ here. You are one of the disciples with empty hands and one of the people with an empty stomach. You cannot create what you need, much less what everyone else needs.

And there is relief in admitting that.

You are not Christ in this story. You do not have to become the source. Christ remains the source for you.

Jesus' command exposes what the disciples cannot do on their own. A preacher cannot manufacture faith. A grieving person cannot call the dead back. A guilty conscience cannot absolve itself. The Church does not own some hidden supply of grace.

So, Jesus says, "Bring them here to Me" (Matt. 14:18).

Once the loaves are in His hands, the question is no longer whether five loaves are enough. The question is who has taken them.

Matthew says Jesus tells the crowd to recline on the grass. He seats them like guests at a banquet. They had arrived as a mass of need, and He receives them as the flock of the Shepherd.

The 23rd Psalm is taking flesh before their very eyes: "He makes me to lie down in green pastures... You prepare a table before me" (Ps. 23:2, 5). Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord had promised, "I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out... I will feed My flock" (Ezekiel 34:11, 15). Now, the Son of David is standing in the wilderness, gathering and feeding them.

The 78th Psalm records Israel's old question: "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?" (Ps. 78:19). Here is the answer. God has come in the flesh, and He is setting the table Himself.

Moses prayed, and the Lord gave manna (Ex. 16). Elisha fed one hundred men with twenty barley loaves, and some remained (2 Kings 4:42-44). Jesus takes less and feeds thousands. He is not merely another prophet in the line. He is the Lord who fed Israel and the Lord whose Word sustained the prophets.

Psalm 136 speaks of the Lord as the One "who gives food to all flesh, for His mercy endures forever" (Ps. 136:25). Usually, the Lord gives bread slowly. A seed goes into the soil. Rain falls. Grain grows. A farmer harvests, a miller grinds, a baker prepares, and someone places it on the table. We call it ordinary because it happens every day. But it is still His hand opening to feed His creatures (Ps. 145:15-16).

Here, He gathers that long providence into a moment. The hands holding those loaves belong to the Word through whom the grain, the soil, the sea, the fish, and everybody in the crowd were made (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16-17). The wilderness remains a wilderness, but it is no longer empty. Its Creator is standing in it.

Yet, even this is not the deepest thing Matthew wants us to see. The true difference between Herod and Jesus is not simply that one king gives a better meal. Herod protects himself by sacrificing another man. Jesus saves others by giving Himself.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus stood hungry in another wilderness. There, Satan told Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" (Matt. 4:3). He would not use His power at the tempter's command to serve Himself. Here, He uses that power freely for others.

Later, as He hangs on the cross, the mockers will say, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save" (Matt. 27:42). They do not understand what they are saying. He does not save Himself *because* He is saving others. If He comes down, the guilty remain under judgment. So, He stays.

That is why Isaiah's invitation is free. "Come, buy and eat... without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1). Isaiah 55 comes *after* Isaiah 53, where the Servant is "wounded for our

transgressions,” “bruised for our iniquities,” and the Lord lays on Him “the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5–6). The feast costs the guests nothing because the Host bears the full price.

The hands breaking bread in the wilderness will be opened by nails. The Son who says, “They do not need to go away,” will Himself be led outside the city, under the curse, carrying the sin that separates us from God. He will cry, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46). He enters the full horror of our exile so that sinners, once excluded, might be brought near and made sons.

He knows the times you have protected yourself at another person’s expense. He knows the needs you hoped would disappear. He knows how quickly fear can make His promises seem small. None of it makes Him step back. He goes to the cross for you.

Matthew tells us that Jesus takes the loaves, blesses, breaks, and gives them to the disciples (Matt. 14:19). Those verbs return on the night He is betrayed: “Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body’” (Matt. 26:26). Then He gives the cup: “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

The meal in the wilderness is not yet the Lord’s Supper. There is no wine, and there are no words of institution. But the Host is the same, and Matthew is teaching us to watch His hands.

In the wilderness, He gives bread. At His altar, He gives Himself.

Now, you were not sitting in that grass when Jesus fed thousands. So, where does the same Christ meet you now? The prophet Isaiah answers, “Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live” (Isa. 55:3).

He puts His mercy outside of you, where you can hear and receive it. In the preaching of the Gospel, He speaks His promise into your ears. In Holy Absolution, He does not ask you to guess whether forgiveness might be possible; He says, through the mouth of His servant, “I forgive you *all* your sins.” In Baptism, He placed His Name on you before you had anything to offer Him, joining you to His death and resurrection. At His Supper, He gives the body that bore your sin and the blood shed for your forgiveness.

When your conscience says, “I have only weak faith and the same old confession,” Christ does not tell you to find a better supply within yourself. He gives you His Word, His Name, His body, His blood. The last word over the hungry is not “Go away,” but “Take, eat.”

Then Jesus gives the loaves to the disciples, who give them to the crowd (Matt. 14:19). The order matters. Christ gives. The disciples receive. Then, they carry what came from Him.

That is the Christian vocation. Jesus remains Lord. You remain His servant. The pastor does not create forgiveness; he speaks what Christ has entrusted to His Church. Parents do not create daily bread; they receive and place it before their children. Christians do not become saviors, but Christ uses their ordinary hands to bring food, patience, presence, and mercy to a neighbor.

Perhaps the person you wanted to send away is the person beside whom He now asks you to stand. You do not have to solve everything. You do not have to become the source. But you should carry what He has given.

Matthew ends simply: “They all ate and were filled” (Matt. 14:20). Not some. All. Women and children too, though the count names five thousand men (Matt. 14:21). It was likely a lot more than five thousand. And when everyone has eaten, twelve baskets remain.

This is not a promise that every Christian will always have a material surplus. John is dead. The cross still lies ahead. The point is that the crowd did not use Christ up. Their hunger did not thin His mercy. No sinner has ever come to Him and found that the forgiveness had run out just before his turn.

Herod's table is gone. His palace is dust. The honor he killed to protect could not keep him alive.

But Christ's table remains. His Gospel is still preached. His absolution is still spoken. His body and blood are still given. His mercy still endures.

Now, those people in the wilderness would hunger again. They would grow old. They would die. But, that meal was a sign of a greater feast. Saint John saw it in Revelation 7, where he wrote: "They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore... for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them" (Rev. 7:16-17). Isaiah saw the Lord preparing a feast and swallowing up death forever (Isa. 25:6-8).

So the good news is this: the King who feeds you in the wilderness will not leave you in the grave. He will call you out, gather you with His people, and seat you at the feast where the light never goes away.

Until that day, dear saints, hear His word again: "They do not need to go away." His Word still calls the hungry. His absolution still keeps the ashamed from fleeing. His table still has a place for the empty-handed. And when the last wilderness is gone, no one who is in Christ will ever be sent away again. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NKJV.