“And the People Said…”

Isaiah 55:1-5 Matthew 14:13-21

Some people have a nose for finding free stuff. One of my best friends can sniff out a free sample, free gift, complimentary tote bag like you would not believe. I swear that I have gone places all my life and I have never found so much free stuff as I did when I hung out with her. In conferences, workshops, festivals, fairs – you name it. Once, we were in a mall together and neither of us had too much money. I told her I was feeling hungry and she told me, “hold on!” I swear, not five minutes later, she came back with free milk and cookies – and they were good cookies, big cookies, name brand cookies!

Apart from spending time with magical friends, we all know how it goes. You want something – you pay for it. That’s just the way things are. Since we know that that’s how things are, it can be jarring for us to really see, hear, and learn from scripture passages like the ones we are focusing on this morning. Like in the Isaiah passage – everyone is invited to the waters including those who can’t pay. They buy without money – including wine, milk, bread, rich food – and delicacies?! This is so far from our norm, that we start thinking, “this must be talking about heaven. In what world does everyone get the same good stuff?”

It is appealing to imagine the joy of heaven, the fulfillment of our longings – but what if we set the stage here and now? What if we took the beauty of this vision and made ourselves a part of it? I think that’s part of what Jesus was doing when he fed the multitudes again and again. In each of the Gospels there’s a miracle story of Jesus feeding crowds of people – sometimes more than once in a single Gospel! This miracle – this eating together – it clearly matters.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, people flocked to Jesus and waited to meet him, to be healed by him. Jesus met people with chronic illnesses and he lifted that burden from them. Much time passed and the crowds didn’t disperse. Having been near him, having been touched by him, they just didn’t want to leave – not yet.

It’s an interesting thing – in the story, we hear a lot about Jesus and what he does: healing, breaking bread, and blessing it. We hear a lot about the disciples – that they were worried about the people needing to eat; that they were monitoring Jesus’s time, saying, “so sorry, Jesus, but you really should wrap things up here.” We find the disciples thinking very practically, very logically. They knew the way things always go – there’s not enough food to share with the whole class so everyone needs to go and fend for themselves. Jesus told them to feed the people and they obeyed. We don’t know how they felt about that – if they believed in the miracle to come.

But one thing we don’t get from the Gospel lesson is the people’s perspective. Did they know what was going on? Did they see and hear Jesus? How did being a part of this miracle change their faith? [Maybe one of those conversations went a little something like this…]

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“And the People Said…”

-Barnabas

-Lois

Barnabas: Jesus sure has cured a lot of people today…

Lois: It’s incredible! Who knows what’s going to happen next!

Barnabas: Did you see that lame guy dancing the lambada?

Lois: Barnabas, there’s no need for name calling…

Barnabas: No, no…I mean his foot was broken and now he’s tearing up the dance floor!

Lois: Who, that guy over there? (*points*) (*optional for pre-recorded– add stock footage of dancer*)

Barnabas: No, not that one. That’s a guy who was mourning and now he’s doing the macarena.

Lois: Oh, you mean that guy over there? (*points in another direction*) (*optional for pre-recorded – add stock footage of dancer*)

Barnabas: No, not that guy. He was demon-possessed. Now he’s got disco fever.

Lois: Oh, geez…can Jesus cure that, too?

Barnabas: I mean, he’s Jesus…he can cure anything. But that guy looks so happy!

Lois: With moves like that, he could surely stay alive, do the hustle, work at the car wash, be so excited, join a love train…

Barnabas: (*interrupts*) As long as he stays out of the disco inferno, he’ll probably be okay.

Lois: I see what you did there… (*smile at each other*) But you must mean that guy. (*points in another direction*) (*optional for pre-recorded – add stock footage of dancer*)

Barnabas: Yep. That’s the one I mean, Lois. Look at him go!

(*stomach rumbling noise*)

Lois: What on earth was that?! Is the earth shaking? Is the sea attacking us? IS IT THE CURSE OF JONAH?

Barnabas: No, no! Silly person… That is the rumbling of the stomachs of 5,000 men.

Lois: Umm…Barnabas…

Barnabas: Yep, how can I help you?

Lois: Are you counting me in that number or no?

Barnabas: (*slowly, awkwardly*) Eh, no….

Lois: Because I’m a woman. You know, w-o-m-a-n. Also, there’s a bunch of kids here, too.

Barnabas: (*surprised*) Are there really? (*Looks around with growing awareness*) Well, what do you know about that? You’re right! There are women and children all over the place!

Lois: I’m pretty sure that rumbling is coming from our tummies, too.

Barnabas: You know what? That makes sense. So……do you have any crackers?

Lois: Crackers?

Barnabas: Snack-packs, cinnamon rolls, cheesecake, ants on a log, baked Alaska?

Lois: Baked a-what-a?

Barnabas: Oh, you know, it’s that one with ice cream and cake and eggs and you light it on fire somehow…

Lois: What do you think – I bring a whole kitchen with me everywhere I go?!

Barnabas: Yea….(*sees exasperated look in her eye*) No! Of course not! No…that would be ridiculous, riiiiight? (*sees her look again*) Yes, no, I don’t think that. So…ahem….uh, do we all go home now?

Lois: Maybe you can go home. I live several towns over and it’s too far for me to get there before nightfall. I didn’t bring any money with me or anything – I was just so excited when I heard Jesus was in town that I dropped everything to follow.

Barnabas: (*a little sheepish*) Oh, I’m sorry. I mean, I don’t even have enough food to feed my family or we’d have you over. I’m sure…I mean, I’d have to ask my wife first…

Lois: What is happening up there? It looks like his disciples are talking to him. What are they saying?

Barnabas: Well, I don’t know. I’ve been talking to you!

Lois: Hush! I’m trying to hear. (*strains forward to listen for a few moments and really leans into it*)

Barnabas: Say, what if we –

Lois: (*interrupts*) Shush it! I’m still listening! (*strains to listen and leans forward further and further until she falls over*). Aaaaaaaaaaaack! (*sighs in frustration and stays flat*)

Barnabas: Lois? (*walks over to her*) Lois? Is that we he said we should do? Fall over? Lois? (*shrugs, makes the shrugging sound, and falls over like she did*) Aaaaaaaaaaaaaack! (*waits a moment*) I don’t get it.

Lois: You don’t get what?

Barnabas: I mean, I’m still hungry, but now I’ve got dirt all over my clothes. Do you think this means I’m meek?

Lois: Meek? How does this make you meek?

Barnabas: Well, maybe this is just the start of me inheriting the earth!

Lois: (*to the camera*) I wonder if Jesus ever heals people from making bad puns…(*points at Barnabas with side eye and rolls her eyes*)

Barnabas: Lois! I’m still hungry.

Lois: Well, then, I guess you’re just gonna have to be hungry. Don’t you know there’s no such thing as a free lunch? You want something – you work for it, you plan ahead, you bring it along. No one owes you a living, you know!

Barnabas: I mean…I know…I guess. I wasn’t expecting anything. I mean, it’s not like I think I deserve the best of the best, but…

Lois: But what?

Barnabas: But I’m hungry – not just today…every day. We do the best that we can, but most nights there’s not enough food to go around. The crops failed this year and, I know it’s hard all over, but I’m hungry.

Lois: Hey…I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I really would help you out, but I guess I’m homeless for the night.

Barnabas: Wait a minute – what’s happening up there?

Lois: It looks like five loaves and two fishes – that’s not enough to feed this whole crowd. What do they think they’re doing? Oh no…are these people all nuts? Did I miss a day’s work and chores to follow after a crazy person?

Barnabas: Lois, stop. Look – really look! It’s definitely five loaves and two fishes, but the disciples are bringing it around to the crowd. They’re giving it to everybody and it just keeps being enough. I’ve never seen anything like it. No matter how much they give out, there is enough.

Lois: But that’s impossible!

Barnabas: But it’s happening.

Lois: But it’s impossible!

Barnabas: But it’s happening!

Lois: (*slower*) But it’s impossible.

Barnabas: Impossible and real.

(*Cut away and have scraps of bread evident on return OR if video editing isn’t possible, have someone hand scraps of bread/fish to Lois and Barnabas*)

Lois: He must be truly sent from God – a miracle.

Barnabas: (*in awe*) He heals, he teaches, he feeds…

Lois: He’s not just trying to prove how powerful he is. He’s not just trying to prove how clever he is. He saw that we were hungry and far from home and he wanted us to be filled with – let’s be honest – the tastiest bread and fish I have ever eaten!

Barnabas: I didn’t ask him for help.

Lois: I didn’t tell him my worries.

Barnabas: But he saw my need and he answered. I’ve never experienced anything like this. What do I…how do I…what do you even say in light of such grace?

Lois: “Thanks be to God.”

Barnabas: Thanks be to God. Amen.

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I think part of the reason so much of Bible is made up of stories is so that it is easier for us to become a part of them – to live in these stories and to let them live in us. Some people, I would guess, are more likely to read themselves as one of the disciples – bringing urgent problems to Jesus, wanting to help out, and then being divinely empowered to serve others in a great and holy miracle. Other people are probably more likely to see themselves as part of the crowd – far from home, knowing that there are things that we need, but not knowing how to get them…only to find that Jesus is there blessing us more than we could ever ask for or imagine. I wonder what it would be like for people who like to see themselves as disciples to think of themselves as part of the crowd and people who like to see themselves as part of the crowd to think of themselves as the disciples.

Can we embrace that we are blessed to be a blessing AND to receive a blessing, too? Can we loosen our grip on our need to control things and just let ourselves be awash in grace? As we do this, we start moving from being a special disciple or being part of a faceless crowd and we start becoming one big, loving community.

Everything around us, every part of creation is a sign of God’s generosity to humanity. Fully human and fully divine, Jesus embodies that joyful giving in his life and miracles, in his teachings and his gift of salvation. And here we stand in the delight of the Spirit with an opportunity today and every day to be a part of a fellowship of family. So, my friends, may our hearts be ever open to one another, may we give wisely and without fear, may we receive with humility and gratitude, may we live as the body of Christ, and may we never forget to praise God’s holy name. Amen.