

# SUMMER

## SERMON SERIES 2020



Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in Canada  
*In Mission for Others*

Sunday, August 2, 2020

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*Matthew 14:13–21*

Welcome to this summer sermon series that our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is providing for congregations throughout the vacation months, giving your pastor or lay leaders an opportunity to have a break from preparing the message. I am Pastor Dennis Serfas, one of the part-time Assistants to the Bishop, for the Saskatchewan Synod. I am retired and live in Prince Albert, about 150 kms north of Saskatoon. The last 20 years of my career were spent as the Director of Spiritual Care for the Prince Albert Parkland Health Region. Prior to that I was a parish pastor for about 16 years, nine of which were spent here in this congregation of Messiah Lutheran, from where I am taping this sermon, and where my wife and I are currently members.

Today's text is Jesus' feeding the multitudes, the 5,000 plus people, with just a meager two fish and five loaves. He has just been told about the tragic death of his cousin John the Baptist, and like many of us who have experienced tragedy or difficult news, we often try to retreat to a place of solitude to get our head around what has just happened. When I worked with the Health Region and still today, when I do funerals and work part time with a local funeral home, I know that grief requires compassion and support from others, but it also needs some "alone" time to process everything that sometimes hits us like a plow wind here on the prairies. That "alone" time is what Jesus really craved as he got into the boat heading for a quiet deserted place. I know the feeling. I live in lake country, surrounded by a National Park and several lakes, within a 50-minute drive. When I was in the parish, I was tempted to buy a cabin at one of the resorts, to have a place to retreat on rare days off or vacation time. Well, many of my parishoners and residents in the community also had the same idea and had cabins or RVs in those same resorts or parks. Needless to say, it wasn't time away from the parish or the community. Instead, the choice we made is every other year, we go to a resort in British Columbia, about a 12-hour drive from here.

Jesus obviously had more tolerance and patience with the people's needs than I might have or his disciples had on that day.

Apparently, even without Facebook, email or GPS, the people quickly heard about Jesus' destination spot and gathered around him. Not surprisingly, we are told that he "had compassion" for them and dealt with their issues. I'm sure the disciples had some choice words to say about all this. Undoubtedly, they too were looking for some time to kick back and have some R&R on their own. I remember the years I worked in health care, when I was on-call in the evenings or weekends. After a stressful long week or day at work, just as I was ready to enjoy a nice meal with my wife and daughter, or some time working in the backyard, the phone would invariably ring, requesting my return to the hospital or care home for some emergency. Sometimes, when I got there, the situation wasn't as urgent as suggested, and it could have easily waited until next morning.

I'm sure the disciples felt the same way. Couldn't all the people's needs have waited until they got back into town? And if that wasn't enough to deal with all day long, then there was the "food thing." As Lutherans, we know the importance of food at any gathering. Many of our congregations have coffee time before or after services, or monthly pot-luck lunches. Times of celebration and sorrow when people gather together, is usually associated with an abundance of food. What is a wedding without a banquet? And what is a funeral without a lunch? Those things have all been challenged now during the COVID 19, and may never be quite the same again. Just before I prepared this sermon, I had a graveside service and a small family funeral, both with Ukrainian/Polish heritages. Not able to feed people at those events was almost as hard to deal with for the family members as the deaths themselves. Apparently, it seems to have been a similar expectation in Jesus' day as well.

The difficulty though, was that the caterer hadn't been booked in advance. The meat and vegetable trays from Safeway or the Co-op weren't delivered. The hospitality committee at the church hadn't made any egg salad sandwiches and dainties. The disciples had the logical solution. Let them fend for themselves! Or better yet, send them back to where they came from; to the towns that no doubt had their own drive thru or curb side pickups. On top of everything else that they had already put up with, on what was supposed to be a day off, was Jesus now expecting them to put on their chef hats and provide Skip-the-Dishes

delivery service to the hungry crowds? And with what was this miracle supposed to happen? Two little fish and five loaves of bread? Are you kidding us Jesus? Have you suffered from heat stroke out there on that boat all day? These expectations seemed way beyond the disciples' skill set or pay scale!

I wonder how many times we have felt the same or have been squeezed so hard that we were ready to break? We can't do it all alone Jesus? I am the only pastor in this congregation? There are only a handful of us lay people who run the show here, trying to keep everything going and keep the doors open. We didn't meet the budget last year, how on earth will we meet it this year with all the extra challenges and less income? There's got to be another way or somebody else to do what needs to be done. I'm elderly! I'm a single parent! I'm going through a messy separation right now! Haven't we done enough all these years? Isn't it somebody else's responsibility to worry about feeding the hungry, or the effects of climate change on our food chain, or the carbon print on our environment? To all of that, and to all of them, and to all of us, Jesus replies, "they don't have to go away, you take care of them; you give them something to eat." And to everyone's surprise, with Jesus' blessing and intervention, all their needs were taken care of; everyone was fed and filled with all they needed, and there was lots to spare. So, from this we can see that Jesus compassion, also leads to action.

What does this text say about us and where we are at in our lives today? I think it is accurate to say, that for most of us in this country, and for most of us in the church, regardless of how little we have, or how inadequate we think we might be, we probably have much more and much more to offer and share than most countries and people in our world. Many of us come with this mindset of abundance, and anything less, makes us feel deficient or inadequate in comparison. If our congregation is small or dwindling in size, or even if it is large, we can be overly cautious, for fear of the day when we will need what we have given away, or if our business operation is small in comparison to the large corporations, often we feel paralyzed and limited by what we can do, both for ourselves and even more so, by what we can do for others.

If we start anything on the premise that "we never will have enough" then our vision or mission is at a disadvantage from the beginning. As always, as in our gospel text for today,

Jesus is a major partner and provider in the projects that seem so insurmountable to us and our perceived lack of resources.

I remember the first summer I was pastor here in Prince Albert. A few months after my arrival the fall before, the congregation made the big decision to build a new building on a new larger location. The projected cost was about \$1 million. This was more than 30 years ago. We were a fairly large congregation then, but not flush with a lot of extra cash. Being lake country as I mentioned, the summer attendance as well as the offerings were down considerably. One day the treasurer came into my office, and regretfully announced that she did not have enough funds to pay my full month's salary. I remember thinking to myself, "What did I get myself into here?" How would we venture forward into an expensive building project with a large debt load when interest rates were about 10%? But guess what? We did build that \$1 million dollar building and we did have a mortgage for several years. Even though there were lots of new people, the majority of the costs were still carried by the long-time members. But this is what really surprised me! Not once in the nine years that I pastored this congregation, did I ever have to wait for my complete paycheck again. We never had a line of credit and we managed to pay all the bills on time. There was never a huge surplus, but there was always enough.

This taught me a valuable lesson! It wasn't just me that had to make this project happen. Some had more resources to share than others, some had more time and other gifts to offer than others. Yet, when it was all brought together and shared, we had not just enough for our own needs, but still participated in community projects, and supported the synod and wider church. In the midst of it all though, there were a lot of prayers being uplifted with the faith and confidence that God, the ultimate provider, was working in and acting through the people of God, then and now. If we had waited to act, to move forward in mission, only if and when we clearly had enough, then I suspect, that opportunity, and many others that followed because of it, would have been missed.

In contrast, I think of the book just published by President Donald Trump's niece, revealing some more harrowing stories of her uncle. The title of the book reveals a lot. It is called *Too Much and Never Enough*. We have seen evidence of that unraveling in the last four years. Yet, we don't have to look to our southern border. Our human nature of wanting more, in a culture

where feeling and looking better is equivalent to somehow “being better”, always makes us feel we have missed the mark in one way or another. Too much and never enough! In the eyes of Jesus, no matter how little we might think we have, it is always enough and more than enough for him, and especially when we are willing to work and share with him what we have!

Some of you might know the name Itzhak Perlman. He is an Israeli-born violinist known throughout the world as a composer and conductor working with leading orchestras.

At the age of four Perlman lost the use of his legs due to Polio. So, he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. When he performed, it took him some time to make his way to the center of the stage for a concert.

On the evening of November 18, 1995, something went wrong. Just as Perlman finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin snapped. What would he do? It would take a long time for him to get up and go off stage to either get a new string or a different violin. But instead of leaving the stage, the great musician sat quietly for a few moments and composed himself. Perlman again nodded to the conductor to begin and the orchestra started, and he played from where he had left off. As he played, he transposed the music so that he could play with only 3 strings the music that had been written to be played on four strings. When he finished, he smiled, and wiping the sweat from his brow, said, “You know, sometimes it is the artist’s job to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.” How much music can we still make with what we have left?

The world, in different ways, has asked this question in the last few months. Through quarantines and distancing measures and restrictions put into place, we have been forced into a “new normal.” Much of it has been a difficult adjustment. For some, the experience has been devastating with the loss of health, life and their well-being. For others, it has been an inconvenience. However, for most people, I believe this coronavirus has made us pause long enough to reassess our priorities and values. Much good has come as a result of it, and new lifestyles and ways of doing business have emerged and much of it will probably continue. I hope the good parts of it will. The parts that have motivated the world to heed the words of Jesus through various actions, “there is no need for them to go away, you give them something to eat.” And when they did, and when we did, there was more than enough, with much left over. Amen.