

*“O Taste and See”*

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*Readings: Isaiah 49.8-16a*

Thus says the LORD:

In a time of favour I have answered you,  
on a day of salvation I have helped you;

I have kept you and given you  
as a covenant to the people,

to establish the land,

to apportion the desolate heritages;

saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out’,

to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’

They shall feed along the ways,

on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;

they shall not hunger or thirst,

neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,

for he who has pity on them will lead them,

and by springs of water will guide them.

And I will turn all my mountains into a road,

and my highways shall be raised up.

Lo, these shall come from far away,

and lo, these from the north and from the west,

and these from the land of Syene.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;

break forth, O mountains, into singing!

For the LORD has comforted his people,

and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me,

my Lord has forgotten me.’

Can a woman forget her nursing-child,

or show no compassion for the child of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.  
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;  
your walls are continually before me.

*Matthew 14.13-21*

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

In a short story about the life of a young black American man, essayist and novelist James Baldwin gives a hint for our listening today. He says ... *While the tale we tell of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it must always be heard.*

This is a story that belongs to us all, it's a *very* well-known story – definitely not new. It is the only miracle story told in every one of the four gospels, arguably twice in two of them. So we can be sure it meant a great deal to the early Christians as they mulled over what they had heard and seen, and touched and tasted. This story is key to the whole enterprise.

But the way we hear the story depends to a great extent on *who(m)* we most identify with in the story, whose point of view we share as we listen. This tale is one that includes delight and suffering and triumph. So as we reflect on it, let's do an exercise in shifting perspective.

First, think of yourself as a member of the crowd. There is something going on that you've not experienced before, a kind of excitement in the air. You decide to go and see this fellow they are talking about. He's become a kind of superstar lately, so it turns out lots of others have the same idea, and you are caught up in it – a crowd of 5000 men, or if you count the women and children, maybe, say, twenty, twenty-two thousand. [We picture the scenes of thousands protesting across the Maghreb in recent weeks. Or closer to home, to get a mental picture, 5000 is the number that would fit in the new Varsity Stadium – twenty-two is closer to what the old Varsity Stadium held – so if you remember ...] The celebrity has let it be known that he needs a day off, but everybody just decided to follow him anyway, on the off chance that he'll make a cameo appearance. Success! He does, and not only that but he talks and heals and is completely available to the crowd. He tells the most wonderful stories, and then he gets serious, inspires you to shape up a bit in your own life, and you feel that you can do that, and then you watch as he lays hands on those who are sick or limping or blind or deaf – and they are healed. This guy is unbelievable! So full of life and kindness, the whole crowd is just shimmering with happiness in his presence as the hours slip past. You don't care if you're getting a bit hungry, it's just been such a great experience. But then, as the light starts to fade, instead of sending you away, he asks you to sit down. And a moment of quietness comes over the crowd, as he takes a small basket of food and prays over it.

Now let's shift position, and be disciples. This big day isn't quite as much fun for you. You have a sense of responsibility for all this. You already know this guy is unbelievable, and you love him and want to look after him. As the crowd has grown, you are watching anxiously – worried about Jesus, who you know is tired and courting burnout. You're shocked by the numbers of people, and you realize they are going to need some food. So you worry more. Anticipating their needs, you wisely suggest a sensible plan – bring the event to a close and let them get home while it's still light.

(They are in a deserted place by the sea – no streetlights). But no. Jesus, as he so often does, takes your well-intentioned insight and gives it a quarter turn – ratchets it up until it is unrecognizable. *You* can feed them, he says. The realist in you answers: Not really – we have only five loaves and two fishes. Well, bring them here, he says, and let the people sit down. Everything becomes quiet, and he prays.

Now, let's imagine the story from Jesus' perspective. We see him first at a low ebb. He has been discouraged by the cynical reaction in his home village. Then, hearing the gruesome story of John the Baptist's death, he begins to see the writing on the wall for his own mission. This is not going to end well. He needs to get away for a bit, and withdraws to a deserted place. But the people show up anyway, in their thousands. No time for taking a breather. He has to set aside his thoughts of death, for there is work to be done. He looks out over the crowd and the scriptures say, he had *compassion* on them. Linguistic scholars trace the Greek word *splagchnizomai*, translated as compassion, to a root meaning 'to take the entrails out of the sacrificial animal as part of a blood sacrifice ritual'. It implies evisceration. So we might say, 'Seeing them tore his guts out', or perhaps more gently, 'his heart went out to them'. In any case he moves forward into the crowd. Touches, looks, smiles, comforts. Out of his own emptiness, he heals them, and the energy rises again as he offers his love. Their happiness and his mingle in a day of transformation. And as the sun edges to the horizon, the disciples interrupt him with their concern to look after the crowd. As always, Jesus sees in these dedicated followers a capability that they cannot see themselves. He says, let's just sit down, and in that quiet moment, he takes the few loaves and fishes and prays.

The next thing that happens is that the disciples move through the crowd, handing out bread and fish. Everyone is fed. There is more than they need. A miracle! The scripture is silent on how it happens. Doesn't really even say what happens. Jesus doesn't do anything other than pray, and then something changes definitively. Does everybody share? Is there a sudden wondrous airlift? Well, that is the nature of a miracle. You *don't* know how it happens. All we know is that at the end of a long day, in the face of tiredness and scarcity, Jesus prayed over the bread and many, many were fed. And no one forgot the story.

This should be good news for us here in Toronto 2000 years later. Things can happen that you don't really imagine. Small adjustments can beget big changes. Our small acts of love are gathered and put to use by a love greater than us.

Today we are baking a hundred loaves of bread – that won't go far toward alleviating world hunger. But each of those 100 loaves has a destiny. If each loaf is passed from someone here to someone else – to a neighbour, or a drop-in centre, or a supper program or a food bank, and given with sincerity and good intention, the next steps will take care of themselves. And we may try for 200 loaves next time.

All through this month we have attempted to honour black history and culture, to make ourselves more conscious of the *suffering, the delight and the triumph* that Baldwin wrote about. And we know that a bunch of us singing, and telling stories here in church is such a drop in the bucket for the work of understanding and change that is needed. But we don't know what may be liberated, or what may be begun by the work that we do.

And not just work, but love. So often we love too little, or in the wrong way, wrong timing, or just don't know how. Whether it is absolutely personal and private, or when it comes to feeding the multitudes or overcoming oppression, we fear that our love just won't be up to the task. Jesus says, bring what you have and let me pray over it.

When Jesus stands beside the sea, and breaks the bread and blesses it, something is unleashed. The crowd is quiet as the disciples move among them, giving them what they need. The evening falls. God's work of love is begun. Thanks be to God. Amen.

(Hymn 501 *Break Now the Bread of Life*)