

**Soul Talk for the 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
August 6, 2017**

August 3, 2107  
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***And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.***

***Matthew 14:20***

***The Fullness of Grace***

About 30-plus years ago, United Methodist Communications had a film strip with a record for audio on Baptism. Filmstrips and records (soon replaced by cassette tapes) were the cutting edge of media technology back then.

While the technology is now outdated, the message is always new.

*Water. Without it, we die. Plunge into it, we are refreshed. Overwhelmed by it, we die.*

The rain this morning refreshed the earth in this small part of the world. Not far away few a short weeks ago, the rains inundated and saturated the earth with damaging floods.

As a kid, I enjoyed the smell of rain as it began to fall in the middle of the night. We had no air conditioning. The night was sweltering. The cool breeze and rain drops that came in the night cleansed and refreshed the air, the water restored the earth.

I had this same sense this morning with the early morning rains. The fullness of God's grace. A sacramental rain, *an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual truth.*

Jesus was rejected by some of the people of Nazareth, his home town. Not long after this, the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and told Jesus of John's violent death.

I can imagine Jesus' soul being bereft with inward grief, like a land that is dried and barren, longing for the fullness of *Abba-God's grace.*

Jesus *withdraws to a deserted place.* Deserted, not for long. The crowds heard Jesus was near; perhaps they also heard of John the Baptist's death. Whatever it was that caused them to seek out Jesus, their souls, too, were longing for the fullness of God's grace.

He saw their ailments, the sicknesses of body and soul. His sacramental presence, the *outward and visible sign of the spiritual truth of the fullness of God's grace,* welcomed them. And when it came time to feed them, he did not send them away.

Compare and contrast this to the context of our time.

There is overwhelming anxiety about the world in which we live and great divides between peoples over many things.

Anxiety often produces a need to withdraw to our deserted places, hoping to find a quiet place, a place apart from the pressures and crowds of others who may deeply fear, driving within us a desire for a purity of our beliefs to the result of excluding others for what seem to be sound reasons.

It was this way for the disciples. When it came time to feed the people, they wanted Jesus to send them away. We do not know how they felt about Jesus taking the time and energy to cure the ailing bodies and souls of all the people of the crowd; but on other similar occasions, the disciples' feelings were pretty raw when it came to the massive crowds.

Like the disciples, we can easily say to Jesus, *we have nothing left to give . . .* But this does not suit Jesus nor the nature of the God he called *Abba*.

He took the meager resources of the disciples, blessed them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to distribute among the people. *And all ate and had their fill.*

The crowd was large, Matthew tells us, *about five thousand men, besides women and children*. Matthew's description of the size of the crowd is intentional. He tells us of the number of men and includes the number of women and children who were often discounted and rejected by the social norms of the day.

These social norms, more often than not supported by religious beliefs, were ways of keeping the purity of the so-called righteous intact at the expense of the lesser clean. The Temple in Jerusalem was designed as a sacramental reminder of this, literally building walls between people and quarantining them from each other.

The fullness of God's grace, by the example of Jesus Christ and his ministry, does not recognize our quarantining efforts of maintaining the purity of one group of peoples over another. Jesus saw these efforts for what they were, and still are, the sacramental signs of the ailments of our bodies and souls.

When we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, do we not say that this meal and this water is God's gift offered to all all without price?

Do we not say that these sacraments express the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

Do we not say this is Jesus' Table where all are welcome?

And if we say these with meaning and belief, yet do not live them outside the walls of our cherished local churches, then do not our professions of faith mean little or nothing to the world of people who come to Jesus with their hurting bodies and souls?

The promise of Jesus is there will always be enough for everyone.

*The fullness of God's grace is more than sufficient for all peoples for all times.*

Jesus said it. Jesus did it. Once and for all.

Why should we be afraid?

*May you live in the presence of the risen Christ today.*

*Harlan*

*Soul Talk is a mostly weekly commentary written for the souls of preachers and other pilgrims and the soul of the church. I always welcome comments on Soul Talk at [harlan.gillespie@iaumc.org](mailto:harlan.gillespie@iaumc.org).*