



Lonely in Bethsaida

TEXT
Luke 9:10–17

June 26, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus was teaching them about the kingdom of God. He didn't just teach them about God's kingdom by talking to them, telling them stories and stretching their minds. He taught them about God's kingdom when he fed them.

Who did you eat with this week? Did you eat by yourself some this week? I did.

Did you eat with family? Maybe you shared lunch with a friend? That's all good. What about with someone you know less well? When is the last time you ate a meal with someone you know a little bit, but not really well? What did you talk about?

The 5,000 that dined in that deserted place, they couldn't have known each other that well. What do you think they talked about?

All the gospel writers tell the story of feeding the 5,000. It is the only miracle of Jesus that all four gospel writers tell. It could be a very important story for us, for our time.

The disciples have just returned from a missionary journey, and they are worn out. They withdraw privately, it says. It's time to rest, to retreat, to "recharge the engines." But the crowds spot them and follow

them. And here, they find themselves surrounded by hungry crowds whom Jesus will teach about the kingdom of God all day long. As the day draws to a close, the disciples say, send "the crowd" away; let "them" go into the towns and villages so that they can find something to eat.

It's logical. And maybe if the crowd leaves, the disciples can get some food themselves. Everybody needs to eat. So send them away.

But Jesus is Jesus, so he tells his disciples, "You give them something to eat."

It's a metaphor for the church, don't you think? It's a common story for the church. We are always surrounded by a hungry world — hungry for healing in the face of injury; hungry for hope in the face of despair; hungry for some kindness in the face of hostility. And of course, some folks are hungry for food in the face of poverty. We live in a hungry world, and we never have enough resources.

Jesus is not unaware of this circumstance, but the crowds are hungry. So Jesus says, "You feed them." It seems the hungry crowds take priority. I get that the crowds are hungry; but why does Jesus need his disciples to

be the ones to feed them? They could get food on their own.

I have preached to you on the feeding of the 5,000 several times before. Every time, it was a sermon about mission. The followers of Jesus share their resources with Jesus, meager as they are, and Jesus does amazing things to feed a hungry world. I have seen that before. You have too. It happens every week here at Village. The church, blessed by God's grace, has done amazing things in mission to make the world a more humane place.

But I am not so sure this is a story of mission. Maybe Jesus tells his disciples to feed them because he needs his disciples to rethink the desire to send *them* away. Maybe Jesus needs his disciples to eat with them.

This is the first time I have preached on feeding the 5,000 from Luke. And Luke adds something interesting to the story. The feeding happens in a lonely place. The Greek word is *eremos*. It means "abandoned, empty, even desolate." Read the story in Mark or Matthew, and you would no doubt imagine that Jesus and his disciples found an isolated retreat center by the water's edge. It was a lonely place. But Luke says this lonely place, this deserted place, is not

out in the wilderness. Luke says that this *eremos* is actually in the middle of a city: Bethsaida.

It's a detail that Luke adds to the story: They are lonely in Bethsaida.

This is why I say this is an important story for us: lonely in Bethsaida ... lonely in the city. It is lonely not because there is a lack of people; it is lonely because there is a lack of connection. We know what that is about. We live in a lonely culture.

If I understand the text, Jesus wants his disciples to feed the crowds not out of a sense of mission, but because he wants them to eat together. His main concern is not that they can't find food; his concern is that they are lonely.

Jesus' disciples said, "Send *them* away." *Them* ... it is a lonely word. The thing about *them* is they are not *us*. The kingdom of God changes that.

No wonder Jesus says, "Let's eat together." When we eat, it's harder to stay *us* and *them*. Relationship happens at table. When Jesus talks about eating, he is not talking about nutrition; he is talking about friendships.

I spotted Carol Wells in the seminary library. I was a student at the seminary; she was a student at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education across the street. I had noticed her, but we had only had brief conversations.

I walked over to her and said, "So, I was wondering, if you didn't have other plans, and there was nothing on TV you needed to watch, and if, you know, there was a break in your schedule, you know, you might want to get

dinner ... together ... sometime ... just dinner ... my treat. (See how smooth I was! It's amazing I didn't sweep her off her feet.)

She looked at me and said, "I'll have to get back to you on that."

I said, "It's no big deal. It's not like I'm asking you to get married or anything; it's just dinner."

"I'll have to get back to you." She knew that an invitation to dinner is not about nutrition. It's about relationship.

Luke says it was a lonely place, right in the middle of the city. It wasn't lonely because there was a lack of people. It was lonely because there was a lack of connection.

We live in a lonely culture like that. There are many folks trying to figure out what is going on with community in this country in recent decades. Things are changing.

Fifteen years ago, Robert Putnam published a book titled *Bowling Alone*. It was an examination of shifts in American community. He pointed to the decline in social institutions — everything from Rotary to Boy Scouts to Junior League to neighborhood supper clubs, to churches as well — those institutions where we used to connect with our neighbors. None of them are as strong as they once were. Putnam asserted that we are becoming increasingly disconnected from our communities. We are *lonely in Bethsaida*.

Marc Dunkelman takes this a step further in his recent book *The Vanishing Neighbor*. He observes that we are not doing

without neighbors, but we are more selective. Rather than our community being defined by those who live on our street or in our neighborhood, we are connecting with others through technology. But those connections are different. We are connecting with people who are like us. Knitters are able to find community of folks on line who love to knit. Or biker riders find other bikers. Or shared political views are found on line. Dunkelman argues that we are increasingly connecting with folks with whom we find agreement. It gives us the impression that the reasonable world thinks like we do.

Dunkelman is concerned about this because he notes that innovation is nourished when people who see life differently are in contact with one another. When engineers and artists share conversations and worldview, when Republicans and Democrats have actual conversations, creativity, innovation emerges. Dunkelman is making the case that the innovation that drives our economy needs this kind of mixing it up with people who think differently. And he argues that the political process needs people of different views rather than the fantasy, as David Brooks calls it, that political opponents can somehow be beaten so soundly they will go away.¹

There are a collection of voices that suggest that we are more divided than we used to be — that it is common for us to say, "Send them away. Let them eat somewhere else."

When we don't find ourselves with people of other walks

of life, other social circumstances, other political views, other worldviews, Dunkelman suggests that “we have less confidence in the average goodwill of the stranger.”² When there are fewer opportunities for us to mingle with people different from ourselves, the temptation is to identify them as *them* and want to wall them off, close the gate, send them away, let them eat elsewhere.

I read that, and there is something that seems to ring true. I do know this: When we eat together, our confidence in another’s goodness is boosted. When we eat together, we grow in friendship. The English word *companion* comes from the Latin *com* and *panis*. *Com* means “with” and *panis* is “bread.” A companion is one with whom we share bread.³

Jesus knew that. The disciples said, “Send them away.” *Them* is a lonely word. But to Jesus, they are not *them*; they are *us*. So why wouldn’t we eat together? That’s what it is like in the kingdom. Maybe *them* is not even a word we need in the kingdom of God.

My wife Carol was, for almost a decade, a hospice nurse. A hospice nurse brings care, and often friendship. She tells of a relationship she developed with a patient. I’ll call him Josh. He was a young adult. The time of his departure was drawing close, and he was living with his mother, AJ. AJ and Carol live in different worlds. AJ has always lived life on the bottom; not much education. She worked a couple of jobs, and piecing them together,

it appeared she still struggled to make ends meet.

But AJ was from the South, and if you talk with Carol, it’s pretty easy to tell she is from the South as well. On one visit, they got to talking about Southern food: fried chicken and barbecue like they make it in Carolina; peach cobbler and greens and hush puppies. Do you know about hush puppies? Carol said, “I love hush puppies!”

AJ said, “How do you cook them?”

“Cook them?” Carol said, “I have never cooked them; I just eat them when I go out.” They laughed.

A few days later, Carol stopped by to check on Josh. AJ was there. She said, “Come in here, girl.” She had the dough ready and the oil heated. “Let’s cook us some hush puppies.” They did. And they sat at table and shared a few hush puppies, and their relationship changed that day. We become more human when we eat with one another. We become more Christian when we let the table determine who we are.

“You feed them,” Jesus said.

They all ate, it says. They all were filled, it says — filled with bread and fish, no doubt, but filled with companionship, filled with community, filled with friendship, filled with hope, filled with the things for which we are hungering.

They were lonely in Bethsaida, which is why Jesus told them, *I have a better idea: Let’s eat together. Eat with them and just talk with them until you can’t imagine sending them away.*

Who are you going to eat with this week? It’s worth thinking about. It could make more difference than you imagine.

¹Marc Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor* (2014), p. 229

²*Ibid.*, p. 135

³Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (2015), p. 149

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.