

Hillside Picnic

John 6:1-15

Come with me and sit on a grassy hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. It's been a long day. The morning began at home with the choice to go and see this Jesus fellow everyone's talking about. Noontime found us listening watching as he taught and healed the sick and the lame and possessed. About mid-afternoon Jesus withdrew and went with his closest followers to boats waiting by the shore. We looked on as the boats disappeared across the water, getting smaller and smaller.

At that point, someone cried out, "They're heading to the opposite shore. We can walk around the end of the lake and meet them when they land". And so the long walk began, the crowd gaining in size as others along the way heard where we going. And just as we hoped, there was Jesus again on the other side.

Now it is dinner-time. The children are fussy and the old people tired and restless. You hope no one will hear the grumble of your own stomach. Questions of whether there is a McDonald nearby run through the crowd. Far from home and hungry is a hard place to be.

It is just at this point, at the peak of your hunger that you notice Jesus holds in his hand two fish and five barley loaves. You hear his voice, "Father, thank you for this food which you have provided". Then his friends are passing the fish and bread among the crowd. When it is your turn there is plenty and you eat and feel satisfied. You notice they are even collecting leftovers.

Who is this man who teaches with authority, who can heal the sick, and now has fed 5000 men as well as women and children with five loaves and two fish? Someone in the crowd cries out, "This must be the prophet we have been waiting for". Another voice says, "Let's make king". Other voices take up the cry. But Jesus is gone. He has withdrawn into the dusk and it is time for us to go home.

Nice as it would be we cannot stay on this hillside in first century Galilee. It is time to come back. Back to twenty-first century America, back to Mekemie Memorial Presbyterian Church, back to a Sunday morn in May. In a sense we are far away from that hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, far from that crowd and far from that miracle.

In another way we are still very close. There are still hillsides in the lives of each of us where we sit hungry. And Jesus still comes to these hillsides and feeds us.

We sit on the hillside of our loneliness, wondering whether there will every be a place or a person for us, wondering whether our hunger to be loved will ever be filled, wondering whether the gray days will go on forever. Jesus comes to us and feeds us through a phone call, an invitation, a hug.

We sit on the hillside of our self-doubt wondering whether we have any gifts, wondering who would want our gifts if we had any, wondering how God can use our lives messed up as they are by our bad choices and failures. Jesus comes to us and feed us through the company of believers who welcome us, the friend who affirms us, the promises of God proclaimed to us.

We sit on the hillside of our grief and physical pain wondering whether anyone or anything can ever be as good as that person or time which has been lost, wondering whether there will ever again be laughter or dancing, wondering whether the pain will ever go away. Jesus comes to us and feeds us through clowns and rainbows and the courage which rises within us to face another day.

All of these are signs of his coming, signs which are just as real and just as important as the healing of the sick and the multiplication of the fish and loaves in faraway Galilee. However, now as then, the signs are not just for themselves. These signs of god's coming are accompanied by a question, "Who is this Jesus to you?" For the writer of John's gospel the signs always point toward Jesus' identity as the Son of God.

The signs in our lives are for the same reason. They are all around us but we often fail to see them. Did you ever drive into Salisbury and buzz right on by the turn for 13 without any conscious memory of seeing the signs for Dover or the Bay Bridge? It is the same way with God's signs.

The signs of God's reign, of God's redemption are all around us. Where do you see God's mercy? Who are the ones who show you God's grace? In your everyday life, where does the sacred break into the ordinary demonstrating God's sovereignty and grace? During this past week, the signs of God's grace and love have been all around us. What are the ones you have noticed?

The signs point us toward one question. It is the same question that the gospel writer asked his readers so long ago. Who is this Jesus to you? It is the signs that help

us to answer that question. It is the signs that give us the information we need to answer the question.

“Who is this Jesus to you?” What is your answer to that question? Is he some nice man who walked around a long time ago telling stories or is he Lord of your life, the Messiah, the Savior? Jesus is not a cosmic band-aid or holy bactine. He did not come to make us feel better. He is God among us who has loved us with a love that will not let us go. He is God among us whose body was broken and whose life was poured out for us.

In a few minutes we will partake of the picnic Christ has prepared for us. This one cup and one loaf have fed the church for two thousand years. Do we dare to believe they will not also feed us? Here on the hillsides of our lives, Jesus comes to feed us with his own body and blood.

Here at this table we are given a visible sign of God's promise to always be among us, to always meet us on our hillsides, to always feed us and to satisfy our needs. That promise has been sealed by Christ's death and ratified by Christ's resurrection.

We are called to see the signs of his coming, the signs of his love among us. Then we are called to respond to those signs with grateful hearts, overflowing with love. Remember at another lakeside picnic that Jesus ate with his disciples following his resurrection, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” And in response to Peter's “Of course, I love you”, Jesus says, “Feed my sheep”. He asks us the same question, “Do

you love me?" What is our response? Jesus' command to us is that same as it was to Peter, "Feed my sheep".

On this Communion Sunday, as we sit down at the Table to eat together, we must heed Jesus' call. We are the one he calls to welcome the stranger. We are the ones he calls to affirm the doubting. We are the ones he calls to comfort the grieving and to hug the lonely. We are the ones he calls to declare with our lives that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the one whose love has overcome all the hunger of the world.

Jesus invites us to come to this meal which he has prepared for us and for all of God's people everywhere. Here on our hillsides he will feed us and the whole world with his body and his blood and satisfy our every hunger. He invites us to come in thanksgiving and to go forth in love with our eyes wide open to see the signs of his coming.

Come, Lord Jesus. Fill our lives with the signs of your coming. Empower us to embrace the hunger of our brothers and sisters and use us to feed them. Amen.