

John 6:1–15
Laetare (Lent IV)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
March 10, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today is “Laetare” Sunday, which comes from the first word in the Introit. This Latin word, “Laetare,” means “rejoice.” “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her.” The season of Lent is a penitential season, a season to focus on repentance, or turning from sin and turning towards our Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. We observe two periods of repentance as preparation for observing the two main festivals of the church year. There’s Advent leading up to Christmas and now Lent leading up to Easter. And yet in the midst of these two penitential seasons, there’s a Sunday of respite, a Sunday of refreshment or rejoicing. Today is “Laetare” Sunday, a Sunday for rejoicing as we recognize that the LORD provides for us abundantly in giving us our daily bread.

After Jesus healed the lame man at the pool of Bethesda on a Sabbath day, the Jews persecuted Him for breaking the Sabbath, for working on the day of rest. Not only that, they also sought to kill Jesus because “He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.” Then follows a heated exchange where Jesus tells the Jews that their reading of the Scriptures is in vain because they don’t see that the entire Old Testament bears witness to Christ. Arguments can be exhausting, so Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, or the Sea of Tiberias and up a mountain to sit alone for a while with His disciples. It was time to regroup. But a large crowd was following Him because they saw the signs He was doing on the sick. They saw the miracles Jesus had performed and they wanted in on some of the healing.

When Jesus looked up, He saw the large crowd coming toward Him. Of course, Jesus is God, so He knew exactly what He would do. But as we see so often in Scripture, the LORD will test His people to prove or to strengthen their faith in Him. The LORD had already planned in eternity how He would feed the multitude. But Philip's faith isn't the strongest. It's Philip who later would say: "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us" (John 14:8). Just one little peek, and then we'll know that you are from God. Jesus responds: "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Philip tends towards doubt, as do all sinners. So Jesus asks Philip where they can buy enough bread for the multitude. Philip answers: "Two hundred Denarii wouldn't buy enough for each of them to get a little." One Denarius would be a day's wage, so however much 20 days' wages would be, even that wouldn't be enough to feed the crowd. Maybe that's how much money the disciples were carrying? Or how much they were willing to budget for a meal? Philip looks at the crowds and understands there's no way the disciples can feed them with the money they have. Philip fails the test because He doesn't look to Jesus for the answer.

Then Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, answers without being asked: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" Philip looked at the crowds and now Andrew looks at the meager rations and concludes: "Yea, there's no way we can do this." Andrew also fails the test because He doesn't look to Jesus for the answer. So often this is the case with us as well. We look at the size of our problems or at the trouble we've gotten ourselves into and we don't see a way out. We're confronted with difficulties and impossibilities and we don't see a way forward. The crowd is coming and Jesus is asking where they're going to

eat. We're responsible for people under our charge and we're responsible to people above us. But the demand is too great. There's no way we can do it on our own.

But Jesus knew what He would do. He said this to test Philip, to test Andrew, and to test all the disciples. The questions behind the question are these: "Where are you going to look in time of need? Who are you going to look to for help? Will you only look at the huge problem? At the 5,000 hungry men? Will you only look at the insufficient solution? At the five loaves and two fish?" Jesus is testing the disciples to show them where their focus really is, so that after Jesus does what He knows He's going to do, the disciples will trust in Him all the more. The LORD tests our faith to prove it, to strengthen it, and to show us that Jesus is the only sure foundation upon which we can build.

Jesus told the disciples: "Have the people sit down." Even though there was plenty of grass there, plenty of places to sit, this would be no easy task with 5,000 men, along with however many women and children were accompanying them (Matt 14:21). They were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34), but the Good Shepherd is about to feed them with God's Word and, miraculously, with the bread and the fish. The Good Shepherd sends out His undershepherds to gather the people and have them sit down in groups by hundreds and by fifties (Mark 6:40). This is a foreshadowing of the future work of the apostles and their successors in the entire world as they gather God's people at the feet of Jesus where the Lord will feed them.

Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. Everyone ate. All were satisfied and the disciples gathered up the leftovers—twelve baskets full of barley bread leftover from the five loaves and the two fish. The crowd was too large and the amount of food too little for the disciples to do anything about it, but the LORD took their meager rations and miraculously fed the multitude

with so little. In the presence of Jesus and His miraculous power, those statements made by Philip and Andrew stand out so strikingly. “Two hundred denarii wouldn’t be enough to buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” “Here are five loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” On their own, the disciples are weak and insufficient for the task at hand. When we look only to the problem or to our own resources, we’re left in despair. But when we recognize that Jesus is with us and that He can do all things, we learn that there’s no problem too big for Him. He can and does help in time of need. Just look at the problem of sin. But look at God’s nail-pierced hands. Look at the scars in His resurrected body. There’s no problem too big for the one who laid down His life for you and took it up again. He can and does help in time of need.

This whole account, however, is a picture not only of how God provides for us in general, but in particular in the Lord’s Supper. Verse 6 is key to this entire account: “Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.” Jesus had just explained that the entire Old Testament testifies concerning Him. We see this witness so prominently in the Lord’s Supper, which is the fulfillment of the Jewish Passover. The people of Israel ate the flesh of the lamb whose blood was painted over the doorframe before God led them into the promised land. We in turn eat the flesh of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world in His death on the cross and we drink His blood for the forgiveness of sins, and so the LORD leads us from slavery into the freedom of the promised land, the paradise of eternal life. That’s exactly what Jesus is about to explain to the people in the rest of John 6. Jesus says: “I am the bread of life . . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven. . . Truly truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and

my blood is true drink” (John 6:53–55). The feeding of the 5,000 is a picture of the Lord’s Supper, when Christ, the Passover lamb, gives us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink for the forgiveness of sins. How could Jesus possibly do this? Because He’s God. If He could miraculously feed over 5,000 people with the bread and the fish, He could certainly feed the multitudes with His Body and Blood served from alars the world over until His return. Our LORD says it and so it is.

People often look at the stained glass window in front of you and wonder why a depiction of the Lord’s Supper has fish so prominently placed on the table. Remember, it was lamb served at the Passover meal, not fish. Yet since the Early Church, the feeding of the 5,000 has been seen as a picture of the Lord’s Supper. In the catacomb of Priscillia in Rome, where Christians would worship in secret so as not to be persecuted by the Roman authorities, there’s a depiction of the bread and the fish over the altar tomb where the Lord’s Supper would be celebrated. The depiction is from the first half of the second century A.D., so only about one hundred years after the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. The fish pictured on the table point us back to this miracle as a reminder of how our Lord Jesus Christ miraculously feeds His people with His Body and Blood in the Lord’s Supper.

Rejoice, o people of God! In the desert and the wilderness of this fallen world, with so little to sustain us, our LORD comes and prepares a bounteous table for us in the presence of all our enemies. When we look to the magnitude of the task or to the little we have, we are left despairing. But the LORD provides us with everything we truly need in abundance. He gives us complete forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in His death and resurrection, and He gives us His crucified and risen Body to eat and the Blood He spilled to drink as sustenance on our way to

the heavenly Jerusalem, where we celebrate with all the saints in the true promised land, the new heavens and the new earth. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.