

How Can We Satisfy? – Maci Sepp

Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:8-9,14-21; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

Today marks my first full week back in Greenville, and I still cannot believe that I'm back. I guess I've only been away for a couple months, but after spending the better part of the last three years here in the beautiful golden cornfields of Illinois, I kind of feel like a prodigal child returning home from a crazy summer in the far off "secular" regions of North Carolina. So I'm glad to be back. By the end of the two months, I was starting to use words like "y'all" a lot—as in every-other-sentence a lot. Don't get me wrong; it wasn't all that bad. I stayed on the Duke University campus right next to the Duke Chapel; I toured around the Triangle, which I learned has the highest concentration of research facilities in the country; and I was also only two short hours away from the ocean in one direction and the mountains in the other. But like I said, I am definitely glad to be back.

One of the best things that I will always remember about my job this summer was the staff. The people I got to know were all outstanding, over-qualified individuals who deeply cared about their work and each other. In addition, they were also the most diverse group of people I have ever had the privilege of working with. Of course, I don't just mean racially diverse. I'm talking about people from a wide age range, with unique educational backgrounds, from various parts of the world, with different sexual orientations, and from a myriad of religious backgrounds... The list goes on. Our administrative team alone was almost all women of color. Needless to say, we had some amazing staff dinners.

Now I know there's no such thing as obtaining a perfect score in the "diversity" category of life, and the program itself certainly has flaws of its own, but in all honesty, being present with these people was pretty new and enriching for me. I felt uplifted and fulfilled in a way that I can only describe as existentially and spiritually engaging. It was completely unexpected. At the same time though, a big part of me wishes that this wasn't such a huge surprise. I wish that, instead, this was the norm everywhere and for everyone.

Before I get too ahead of myself, let's take a look at how this ties into today's lectionary. Our first reading from Isaiah is an excerpt from what is known as the Book of Consolation. This collection of passages from Isaiah was directed to those in exile and those who were oppressed, and it spoke words of hope and consolation into their dismal circumstances. These circumstances were life-long and consisted of years filled with injustice, and it's obvious from our daily news feeds that they are far from extinguished in the present day. And yet, the text tells us that these people are still blessed. God has not abandoned them. They are still welcomed into the covenant of God. Not only that, but this covenant shines amongst the nations—ones we do not know—and calls upon them to come and be satisfied by the rich foods and wines. The haves and have-nots are all invited to freely feast. All we need to do is show up and incline our ears to listen so that we may have everlasting life.

In this way, the passage acts as both a comfort to the oppressed and as a Public Service Announcement to the rest of the world. It argues an inclusive way of being. Everyone—the

weak, the poor, the other—is crucial to living out the Kingdom here on earth. We are all invited to live in such a way so long as we recognize what it is we need to be satisfied. Hint: it probably has something to do with accepting and loving whoever it is God brings to the table.

I think it's safe to say that most of us in this congregation find ourselves on the opposite end of the table from the oppressed. Yes, I know all of us are subject to times of hardship, but I'm guessing most of us have gone without experiencing daily anger and hatred from our neighbors, or the government, or society as a whole. We are not often the oppressed. In our nation's current state, it may seem easy to identify the oppressed and point fingers at those who we believe are oppressing. But is it possible that in the midst of trying to be good Christian people, we may unknowingly be oppressing others?

Regardless, the oppressed and oppressor are one and the same at the table of God. And our table is far from complete. Even when we do outreach work and go on mission trips, there are still so many people being left out. Who are we not including? Who is repeatedly being ignored? And when people are consistently left out of our inner circles, are we not perpetuating the problem? The longer the oppressed go unnoticed, the harder it is to know where to start.

In the dog days of summer, it is especially tempting to put this matter on the back burner. It's not at all a matter of not caring—rather, it's a matter of thinking we've finished the job and can move on. Like I said, I believe diversity is a crucial component to the Kingdom. It also pushes us towards a fuller life. I'm not saying we all have to drop everything and go work for Duke, but I am constantly wondering how we can go about being inclusive in a way that is also Christian.

One practical way I see is through discipleship. Today's reading from Matthew tells a miracle story that can be found in all four gospels. Jesus has just been told that John the Baptist has been beheaded, and like any other person with feelings, he is in no mood to comfort or speak to anyone—so much so that he goes off by himself in his boat to be alone in a deserted place. Despite this, everyone is quick to flock towards him for guidance and assurance. This group of over five thousand people seeking solace is so focused on following Jesus, they forget to pack their lunch boxes. They are left with a pathetic amount of food: five loaves of bread and two fish. When they realize this, the disciples immediately want to send them away. But Jesus gives them pause. By his blessing to the heavens, the loaves of bread and fish multiply and all the people are fed. Not only are they fed, they are filled.

From this, we see at least three distinct things happening: 1) it affirms God's power and desire to do good; 2) it proves God's deep concern and genuine compassion for people at a basic, necessary level of survival; and finally, what I find to be the most compelling point, 3) it emphasizes the need for discipleship. This passage is widely known as "Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand," which is only partly true in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus provides the miracle, but then he hands the food off to the disciples, who are sent amongst the crowds to distribute the food. Jesus is a leader who delegates. The disciples not only attend to the needs of thousands, but by going into the crowds with a change of heart, they establish a sense of trust and form relationships with these people. Clifton Kirkpatrick reminds us that we are called to partner with God in bringing the fullness of life to reality. God willingly uses us for miracles. Diversity

doesn't just happen overnight. God gives us a share in that responsibility, and we are actively a part of bringing peace and justice and hope to the world.

So it would seem that there's a lot at stake. When faced with these internal and external struggles, it's easy for many of us to feel disappointment and shame for our actions, or lack thereof. In our reading from Romans, Paul is so deeply grieved for his people who have diverged from a life of worshipping God. They are Israelites who have undoubtedly experienced oppression from the Church itself. None of us—not even Paul—are going to perfectly minister to all nations. We will encounter what we believe to be failure, if we haven't already done so. Even as Paul grieves over his shortcomings, he does not exclude his people from his prayers. He manages to give us hope—hope for the adoption, for the glory, for the covenant, and hope that from us comes the Messiah.

The psalmist also works to reorient our hearts and our minds. The qualities of God that are laid out in this passage are striking, qualities that we would be wise to adopt for ourselves. Over and over, we are told that God is gracious and merciful to all. Embracing these qualities is how we go about being disciples. As for wickedness, I don't believe God is in the business of destroying people. Katie Kime tells us that perhaps hoping for darkness to just disappear is not the right thing for us to be asking for. With good people and good practices and good motivation, our wickedness can be transformed rather than obliterated. Therefore, we cannot simply ignore it. Many of us are about to witness the first year of Greenville University. It's an exhilarating time, especially for those of us who have been around for years, who are invested in this project, who are already members at the table. Transitioning into a university is one of the best opportunities I see for us to do some serious introspection and ask ourselves what we are doing and why. What—or who—could we be forgetting? Who we choose to invite and who comes is not just a luck of the draw. We often default to what we know and understand. Finding the outsiders and welcoming them to our table requires us to be intentional with our time and energy. As our community continues to grow and expand, we must be mindful of this. How are we maintaining the joy and community that is purely Greenville while also inviting others to participate and be filled by what fills us? What do we need to be satisfied? How can we help satisfy others? This isn't something we do alone. As a body, we have an individual and collective responsibility to hold each other accountable and pose these sorts of questions. I pray that we seek out help from God and from each other to find answers or at least begin asking the right questions, and that God gives us the wisdom and fearlessness to be voices of hope and compassion. Amen.