LESSONS FROM THE LEFTOVERS

1. Jesus knows
2. Jesus acts

If you are a person who enjoys eating leftovers, you know that in some cases leftovers can taste just as good or even better than the original entrée. But if you enjoy eating leftovers, you may also know from experience that in order to enjoy leftovers, you actually have to remember what you did with the leftovers.

I remember once we had gone out to eat and we had some leftovers to bring home. I did not want to smell up our car with the aroma of the leftovers, so I put the bag in the trunk, from which they would then be placed into the cool safety of the refrigerator in our kitchen when we got home. Well, the next day, I needed to clear out the trunk in order to run an errand, when out of that trunk came an aroma that was a very specific reminder of what I had forgotten to do. A lesson from those smelly leftovers was to make sure to check the trunk when you get out of the car or at least before you go to bed.

That is an important lesson for day by day life. But far more vital and necessary lessons for our daily lives as God’s children can be learned from the fact that, after Jesus performed the astonishing miracle of feeding the 5,000+ people, this is what we are told in verses 12-13: When the people were full, he told his disciples, Gather the pieces that are left over so that nothing is wasted. So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with pieces from the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

I have no idea what the disciples did with those twelve baskets of leftovers, but from God’s Word I do know that we can learn some very important things about our Lord from the fact that there even were leftovers in the first place. Today, to help us with our daily life with Jesus, let us learn a couple of lessons from the leftovers. We learn Jesus knows and Jesus acts.

The apostle John, who records these words, is very clear about that. When Jesus asked his disciple Philip where they were going to get enough food to feed thousands of people - and remember, there were 5,000 men, plus women and children. John tells us in verse 6 that Jesus only asked that to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do, John says. Yes, Jesus knows.

It is kind of interesting that Philip is the one whom Jesus asked. The area that Jesus and his disciples were in at this time was by a town called Bethsaida. Bethsaida was Philip’s home town. Asking Philip about where they could find some food would be kind of like asking someone who lives in Mankato: Where is the Nearest McDonald’s or HyVee or Arbys. Philip knew that it was impossible to buy enough food if they could even find enough food. Thankfully Jesus knew differently, because Jesus knows.

Jesus asked this question to test Philip. But what are the questions you and I ask to test Jesus? “How will I ever be able to afford that repair or that expense? How will I ever be able to get through that sadness or that challenge? How will I ever be able to meet his or her expectations? How will I ever be able to find a job or a job that I like or a job that pays decent? How will I ever be able to avoid that bully or face that former friend? How will I ever be able to meet someone with whom I might spend the rest of my life?” Many times, don’t we ask those questions because in our weakness we think we know there is no answer? Thankfully Jesus knows differently, because Jesus knows.

Jesus knows what we are afraid of or challenged by or concerned about, and Jesus knows what he wants us to learn. And Jesus knows what we need help with or relief from, so
that we do not get over-burdened or that we do not get placed into a situation we cannot handle. Jesus was not going to let those thousands of men, women and children starve. And Jesus will not let us go without whatever he knows that we need to keep us from serving and clamoring after the earthly things we are worried about. He knows what we need so that we can instead serve him to the best of our ability, especially as he gets us to realize how many abundant leftovers of good things there are in our lives with all the blessings of things and people and opportunities with which he has showered us.

Jesus did not keep testing Philip forever, just as he will not do with us. He only tests us in order to continue to train us so that we can realize that we must depend totally on him. And then he acts. He always acts. Even when we do not think he is acting or we do not know if he is acting, he always acts. In verse10, Jesus said: Have the people sit down, something that may have led the disciples to wonder what in the world he was doing. He then proceeded to carry out one of the most familiar and amazing miracles of the Gospels - the miracle, which except for his own resurrection - is the only miracle all four Gospel writers record - a miracle so powerful and so massive that he did not just feed 10 or 15 or 20,000 people, but he also fed them in such a way, that after they were completely satisfied. There were leftovers. Jesus acts.

We need to remember that the reason Jesus acted in the form of miracles like this was to show that he was the promised Christ, the promised Savior from sin. He was not a show-off miracle worker who wanted to gain their approval by promising to take care of their every earthly need. Both of those important lessons are shown in what John says in verse 14:

When the people saw the miraculous sign Jesus did, they said, This really is the prophet who is coming into the world.

The expression miraculous sign is a key one in the Gospels. When you read that expression, try to reflect on it for a moment. Miraculous refers to the power and the wonder of the miracle itself - what Jesus Christ had the power to do, because he was the Son of God. Sign refers to the purpose of the miracle - it was meant to be like a big, flashing neon signing pointing to the one doing the miracle and declaring that Jesus of Nazareth truly is the Son of God.

In other words, the important lesson to learn from Jesus acts is to remember that Jesus acted through these miracles so that you and I could be confirmed in our belief that when he acted later on our most important need - when he carried out his work on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins - it really worked.

Sadly, so many of those thousands back then did not know or believe or consider important the reason why Jesus acted in powerful miracles like this one. They wanted to take him by force, we are told, in order to make him their king so he could feed their bellies and make their lives great and comfortable, with leftovers of food and money and happiness to spare. Isn’t it ironic and tragic that not that long before this, the people of his hometown of Nazareth wanted to take him by force and kill him when he claimed to be the promised Savior from sin that they needed?

But now the people wanted to take him by force to make sure he would stay alive so he could continue to live among them as an earthly savior that they so fervently desired - and that so many people look for today in earthly heroes who will only fail them in the end - and that you and I can be so easily tempted to think is what will make our lives easier and maybe even give us more reason to serve God?

The lessons from the leftovers point us away from the things that were left over in the twelve baskets to the one who did things like this to let us know that no sin of ours will ever be left over when it comes to us standing before God on the day the angels gather, not the food,
but the elect from the four corners of the earth. The one who knows and who acts knew that there was no way we could stand there on our own with our sins, so he acted in love and compassion with grace so amazing and so plentiful, that there is always enough of that mercy of God left over for us to enjoy the next day and the next day and beyond. There is always enough to share with others, young and old, who, just like us, need to learn God’s wonderful lessons from the leftovers. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill