

Feasting on the word of God

Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Over the past several weeks, we have been exploring the practice of Sabbath, and what engaging in the practice of Sabbath can do for us. So we have covered three of four elements, according to Marva Dawn. The first element we talked about was the importance of resting on the Sabbath. Taking a break to rejuvenate our spirits and our souls. We do this by ceasing – which is the second element – ceasing our work or our worry and anxiety and instead letting that go and focusing on God. We have also talked about the importance of embracing. What we meant by this was that we were embracing intentionality, so that we were being intentional about why do things. Why we worship God. Why we want to serve other people. We think about what we value and how we live that out in the world. The final piece – and another really important element in the practice of Sabbath – is *feasting*.

Today's story of Jesus and the disciples feeding five thousand people who had followed them and had gathered to listen to Jesus is a great story to explore the fourth element of Sabbath practice. At the core of the practice of feasting is the sharing of food together, which nourishes our bodies, which engages our minds through conversation, connects our hearts with one another, and our spirits soar amongst all the people gathered. Feasting together reminds us that we are a part of something beyond ourselves. It helps us to feel a sense of belonging and worth.

Last week, we heard the story about how the followers of Jesus had come again, and Jesus told the disciples that they should take a break. That they should cease their work in order to go off by themselves, just as Jesus does quite frequently. But, after having compassion for the people who had gathered and after sending the disciples off, Jesus chose to take time to teach the people, and then he himself went off into the mountain to be alone with God.

Now again this week, Jesus teaches the disciples about the importance of celebrating and feasting with one another. So not just resting and taking a break and ceasing things. But to feast. The story begins with Jesus noticing that so many people had gathered on the hillside and were waiting to hear what he had to say. But before doing any of the teaching, Jesus again had compassion for all the people who had gathered that day, and he asked his disciples to prepare a feast. The disciples saw this as an impossible task. How on earth could they possibly feed all of these people, when Jesus had told them when they followed him to leave everything they had behind? They were to go with no money, no extra clothing, but to rely on the hospitality of

others. So there they were, in disbelief, thinking it impossible what Jesus was asking them to do.

There are so many seemingly insignificant details in this story, and as we read through it in the Scripture Reflections, they started to emerge for me. The first is when John writes: “Now the Passover, the festival of Jews, was near.” It’s one of those statements that you kind of jump over to get to the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. However, the Passover itself is a festival that gathers the Jewish people together from far and wide to share a meal that tells the story of how God released the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt to deliver them to the Promised Land. In each part of the Passover meal, they give thanks to God for all that God provided them and did for them. The people who were following Jesus, because of how he healed the sick, would now have brought with them things to share at the festival of the Passover.

The second detail that caught my attention was that Phillip, one of the disciples, looked out at the crowd and was overwhelmed by the number of people. At first, Phillip saw only scarcity. He saw an abundance of people with no food. How were they ever to feed everyone? But Andrew, on the other hand, noticed that a boy – someone you wouldn’t expect – had five barley loaves and two fish. And yet, even Andrew himself thought, looking at that, looking at all the people, there was no way this was going to feed everyone. But then Jesus says, “Tell the people to sit down.” Tell them all to sit down.

Here’s the third detail: now there was a great deal of grass in this place. Again, seemingly insignificant, except that there were some nice plush places for five thousand people to sit down. When I read this, I heard echoes of the Psalm 23, which begins: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. The Lord makes me lie down on green pastures. The Lord leads me beside still waters and the Lord restores my soul.” This is precisely what Jesus is doing in this moment. Last week, we heard that Jesus had compassion for the people because they were like sheep without a shepherd. No difference today as they gathered on that hill. And so, Jesus acts as a shepherd to those sheep. Invites them to sit down on this plush grass, and Jesus will then restore their souls, not only through food, but through conversation with one another, connection with one another. Jesus nourishes with water that will make sure that we are never thirsty. With bread that will fulfill our every need. Psalm 23 ends with these words: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, and my cup overflows.” In that moment of being on that pasture, Jesus and God nourish us to the point where we are overflowing with love, energy, with all that we have received from God.

Jesus took the bread – those five barley loaves – he blessed it, he broke the bread, and shared the food with the people who had gathered – the ones who were seated. But they said about five thousand sat down, so this is a good thing. At the end of the meal, Jesus asked the disciples to then go out and collect all the leftovers. And lo and behold, there were twelve baskets’ full of food. How was it possible? The miracle in this story is found in the act of sharing. Of feasting together. As people sat in the grass together, as they saw Jesus bless and share these loaves and fishes that this boy had brought, others began to share what they had as well. Jesus teaches us by what he does as much as he teaches us by what he says.

Marva Dawn points out the following: “Observing the Sabbath includes not only the freedom from and repentance from work and worry but also the renewal of our whole being in grace-based faith and the intentionality of our choosing and valuing but also fun and festivity of a weekly eschatological party...our experience of both present joy in our feasting and anticipation of future eternal consummation of joy.”¹

Have you ever considered worship to be an act of feasting? It is a delightful experience; it is a holy time wherein we dwell in the presence of God. Jesus, in the moment on the hill, was inviting people to worship. Jesus wasn’t inviting people to come to church but was coming and asking them to worship God.

And here is the final seemingly insignificant detail: when the people saw the sign that Jesus had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who has come into the world.” When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. Jesus did not want to be worshipped. By Jesus leaving, he is teaching the disciples, the people, and all of us, that Sabbath practice – resting, ceasing, embracing, and feasting – is about focusing back on God. Basking in the presence of God. It is the call to focus on our relationship with God. For Christians, our Sabbath day is Sunday. Sunday is the day that we come together to worship God. It is a day of rest – or at least, it should be – where we cease our work and embrace that opportunity to deepen that relationship with God. Worship is our time of feasting together. To truly worshipping God, and giving thanks for all that we have, and then sharing that with all people, so that everyone has more than enough.

I wonder, did you wake up this morning and think, “I can’t wait to go to church.” Or, did you wake up this morning and think, “I can’t wait to go and worship.” Is there a difference for you in that statement? Is there a difference between coming to church and coming to worship? I wonder too, how do you prepare yourself to come and worship God? What are the steps that you take to be intentional about coming here and sharing and receiving and being restored?

Our Sabbath practice invites us to feast on the Word of God, and according to what we believe and what we said in the baptism today, “Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, who has come here to reconcile and make new, and who then works in us and others by the Spirit.” The miracle of the story on that hill was that the Holy Spirit was working in every single one of those people, causing them, inspiring them to give thanks and to share in the abundance that they had been given. And like that story, we should not waste anything that we have been given. We need to trust and look out and see the abundance, not the scarcity like Phillip did. We need to feast on what we have here. Allow our souls to be nourished, and then share it with people who are in need, because there is more than enough when we look around. This is the cycle of blessing. This is the practice of Sabbath.

So I want to leave you again with that statement again from Ephesians, where Paul wrote: “May God grant that you will be strengthened in your inner being with the power through the Spirit,

¹ Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly; ceasing, resting, embracing, feasting*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), p. 151.

and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” Know that God loves you and go be a blessing in this world. Amen.