

8-11-2019 Feeding of the Five Thousand © T. Hardenbrook

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dobroye utro. That means good morning. It's good to be home. Thank you for all of your prayers, for all of us who were making this pilgrimage to Russia, to old Valaam Monastery. We felt your prayers. We also did our very best to represent all of you everywhere that we went, praying for all of you, turning in lists of names for people to be prayed for at the relics of glorious and difficult to count number of saints.

It is in God's providence in my mind that we came home and our first day, gathered together again as this local community, this local parish, this local image of Christ and his body, the church here in the world in Felton, that we have the gospel reading of the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

When I read that gospel again, I saw many things in the story of all these people following Christ around. Those who could follow after him, who had the opportunity to follow after him. Some, I think honorably were at home caring for their elderly who were ill perhaps. Others were at the place of work where they really had to be for one reason or another. But some had the opportunity to follow Christ. To follow him on that particular day. Maybe they didn't get to at another time.

But at that particular time and place, they had the opportunity to follow him and when they go, like your brothers and sisters went on this journey to Russia, they don't take very much with them or spiritually speaking, do we take anything at all? Are we going to arrive in the presence of Christ with something to add? We don't. We arrive empty handed. Unprepared.

For myself, particularly literally I was unprepared in many ways. I realized that I was going to Russia about 24 hours before I left. Right? We packed what we know that we will need, but we don't know what we'll need really. We're guessing. Like those many people who follow Christ that day along the shore, they didn't know that they were going to need their lunch.

They had no idea and this is a parallel also for us, particularly for those of us who went to Russia in 1994 and met holy elders at that time, who returned on this trip to have that grace, that particular grace renewed. We didn't know that we would want to stay. Those who followed Christ along the shore did not know they were going to end up wanting to be in his presence for so long that they would end up being unprepared, to be with him that long, to endure with him willingly, wanting to be there past lunch and dinner time.

So much so that the Apostles then turn to Christ and say, "We have to get rid of this crowd." There's five thousand men, not including women and children that are following Christ at this time, a great multitude and they don't have any food. They weren't prepared for the journey that Christ was going to take them on. But in the end, it doesn't matter because Christ is there. He is present. We go empty handed and in great need and when we encounter Christ, he has everything that we need.

We may have an idea of what we should have brought. He knows what we actually need to be supplied with and with the little that we offer, the little that we offer, and in this metaphor, we see Christ establishing the church of the assembly of the people that are gathered there. This multitude, this 'we' that becomes the community of the church and this icon, this symbol of the Eucharist in his giving them bread and fish like his body and his blood.

8-11-2019 Feeding of the Five Thousand

© T. Hardenbrook

From their perspective, they are in a greater need that can be supplied by human hands and they are right. But by the grace of God through his Son and the power of the Holy Spirit, these five loaves and two fish, we had some little dried out fish on our trip. That was part of the anniversary because we had some pretty terrible dried out fish the first time.

But with these two fish that are offered and a few loaves, like the chalice coming forth in the Liturgy, something that is visible and finite and seemingly incapable of fulfilling the needs that we have by the grace of God is made abundant. The blessing goes out to all of the people and all are filled, and all dine on what is offered to them by God.

So much so that there is an abundance left over. Having consumed those two fish and five loaves, there are twelve basketfuls leftover. God is infinite in his bounty that he can offer to us through these finite things and being back, home by the way, which is really the true summation, the true closure on our pilgrimage, being back here, to arrive back where we belong. I thought about Christ, the Son being incarnate, living on the earth for 33 years, and then finally in his divinity, finally being able to return to his home, the right hand of the Father, the place where he belonged in nature.

We belong here as well. It's very important to me for the blessings of our pilgrimage, it will ripple throughout the community. It's meant to do this. That all of us know, those of us who went, those of us who were not able to go, the purpose of our journey to these holy places is for us, for all of us. For the 'we' that is here, the communion of persons that we are.

It is not the lucky ones that got to go on the pilgrimage. It is not the ones that had enough money to go. I promise you that was not true. It is that delegates, delegates were sent from this community to go and harvest a degree of grace and spiritual energy for the sole purpose to bring it back here. That all of us would be blessed. That the 'we' that we are would be invigorated spiritually, would see the goals that are before us spiritually and working in the world and that we would all be blessed.

Saint Paul in his epistle this morning calls out to us that we are called to be perfectly joined together in the same mind and with the same judgment it is often translated. In eighth- grade catechism in the Academy, they know this well for this is the theme that we start our eighth-grade catechism on. That we are called by God to be perfectly united in our mind, and the word in Greek is 'nous,' and in our judgment, which is sort of a strange translation. It's really in our 'nome', in our thoughts.

In the nous, the heart and mind of the soul, the rational power given to us by God that makes us like him in his image and the knowledge that we have, the ability for understanding that comes to us and is assisted by our brain, that we would be perfectly united with one another in everything that we believe in, everything that we think.

When God says perfect, he means profoundly perfect. Perfectly perfect, infinitely perfect. These words are given to us by Saint Paul I think today to realize that we have a journey to continue, although our Russia pilgrimage is over.

We are called to share everything that we have, both those who stayed and those who went, to be a people who are united in mind and soul for our own salvation and for the salvation of our brothers and sisters and for the salvation of the world to the degree that we are called by God to participate in it. Saint Paul says, "I was not called to baptize, but to preach the Gospel."

8-11-2019 Feeding of the Five Thousand

© T. Hardenbrook

I felt convicted that way, that coming back here, being this people who are not a minority. It is so important that we don't have this image of ourselves as Orthodox Christians here in America, particularly in California where we somehow on this journey that we are on personally came to the right faith and it's not very popular. It's not very well known, but it's the right one. Finally, I arrived there and I'm going to hang onto it because I'm in the right place. We can't have that mentality regarding our Orthodoxy.

At Pentecost, Christ founded the church that the world might be saved by the participation of those who spread the word of the good news, the Gospel of his salvation offered to the world and that those who are called to baptize would baptize those who wanted to be saved, who wanted to begin being saved as Saint Paul tells us. We are a part of a missionary effort to save every human being who has ever existed by our prayers and by our actions, by our own faith, by our belief, by participating in the sacraments.

By going and visiting Russia, like going and visiting Greece or another Orthodox country anywhere. There's great history and grace and power there where we see a nation transformed by their love for Christ in his apostolic church. We are on the missionary edge of that salvific work. We are missionaries. Whether you like to think that way or not about yourself, we are missionaries and we are on the front.

We are not a strange people. We are the people of God in a strange land and we have a job to do like Paul to preach the Gospel and to see that those who want to begin to be saved have the opportunity to be baptized and brought into his Holy Church. I don't expect for all of you to get on the same page I'm on in just one homily, but certainly the blessings that we hope to bring will bless all of you and others through you. That the ripple effect, so to speak, of our journey would be a blessing for everyone.

When we were in Russia, we had the great blessing of venerating incredible saints that we had an idea that they would be there. We venerated the greatest Relic, sometimes the whole body of Saint Tikhon, Saint Innocent of Alaska, Saint Sergius of Radonezh, Saint Xenia, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, John of Kronstadt, Alexander Nevsky, Saint Sergius and Herman, the founders of Valaam Monastery, Saint Herman of Alaska, Saint Philaret of Moscow, who many of you are familiar with though you might not know it. He is the author of many things, but of the morning prayer that begins, "Grant O Lord for me to greet the coming day in peace."

That prayer that we say in the morning, Saint Philaret. We venerated the relics of Saint Vladimir and Olga. Then we encountered saints that we, I don't think thought we were going to encounter like Saint Stephen, the Protomartyr. Venerating his entire forearm. The first, he who was stoned while Paul held the clothes of the Pharisees. Saint John Chrysostom, Andrew the Apostle, Joachim and Anna, John the Baptist, Basil the Great, of the great Athanasius the Great, Saint Nicholas and so many more.

It will take us a long time to make a list, but we find there in those great saints, something that I want you to see yourself called to participate in. One of the things that hit me being there was that for generations and generations, faithful people have done a simple job at keeping the faith and sharing it with other people. That's all.

8-11-2019 Feeding of the Five Thousand

© T. Hardenbrook

Simple people by the millions over the centuries simply being faithful to the greatest degree they could and simply sharing that faith with those around them. Not putting forward their will or their idea of who God is or the world's idea of who God is or what is right and wrong but presenting the idea of Christ in the world. The Christ who revealed to us all truth, the Christ who himself is truth.

Us submitting to the truth of that Christ rather than imposing on him our own ideas and our own philosophies and then sharing that reality with those around us to whatever degree we can. Person after person, family after family, decade after decade, century after century. Some simple people that we don't even know that even existed. Other great saints and martyrs, that we keep their memory and we are called to participate in that same process.

As we continue to build this church and this community with our brothers and sisters in Santa Cruz County, that we might do a small part to preach the Gospel to California. That this nation might be saved. We have to have that on our hearts for we are not a minority trying to survive against the majority. We are the representatives. We are the front line of the church as it expands across the globe and offers salvation to all nations, all peoples in every place, and every time.

It's exciting if you believe that. It's a great thing to participate in. It makes it easy to get up in the morning and do your prayers or to study the things you need to study, to answer the questions that you have and read the scripture that has been given to us. When we see ourselves as workers with a sense of urgency for saving those that God is putting us in contact with.

It becomes a joyful labor, one with great energy and great zeal. We pray that all of us will have a taste of that as we go forward. We pray that during the Dormition Fast, which begins this Wednesday, that after having a summer of rest and excitement and fun, that we would be prepared to focus on the Mother of God.

To ask her to come into our lives, to end this ecclesiastical year, that with the beginning of September, we can renew our effort and grow again more this year in our love for God and our love for the faith and the love for those around us whose salvation we are called to participate in.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.