

“Bread of Heaven”

Sermon from August 2, 2020

Chrisie Reeves-Pendergrass

In February, my husband and I celebrated ten years together and fulfilled a life-long dream of ours. We went to Paris, France. We toured the Palace of Versailles. I had always heard about the Palace of Versailles, which was built by Louis XIV and it is huge and can be seen from miles around. When it was built it looked over all the villages and was the center point of the French countryside. We took a train from Paris out to Versailles, and we were wearing good walking shoes, which is an important part of the story. In the morning we went through the palace itself, as our plan was to spend the morning in the palace and then have lunch and spend part of the afternoon going through the gardens before we needed to catch our train back to Paris in time to make our flight out of Charles De Gaulle Airport. Now, we go on trip really cheap because neither of us have jobs with high earning potential. As a consequence, we do not have tour guides, we have podcasts. I like to think that I do a pretty good job of research ahead of time, but I missed a really important detail and that is just how expansive Versailles actually is.

After we had gone through the palace and seen the famous hall of mirrors, which when it was built was the largest collection of mirrors in the world. We step outside at about noon into the gardens and it's winter and even though many of the topiaries and fountains are covered for protection from the cold, you can tell this is a spectacular garden. Off to the side is a fleet of golf carts, which we don't pay any attention to, but we should have. We decide that we are going to let ourselves wander through the gardens until we find one of the restaurants and we'll stop and have lunch. We let ourselves get lost, because hidden throughout are hidden parks, statue gardens, fountains, lakes, pond, little castles.

The next thing we know, it is 2 o'clock and we are starving and our feet are killing us. We almost can't make it back to the main palace because our feet hurt so bad from walking on the uneven terrain. Turns out, those golf carts are rentals to go around the gardens, because the grounds are that large. Which next time, we will be something that definitely happens. This was an overabundance or a superabundance of a garden this entire palace was more than was ever needed. There are smaller palaces on the property that could have been enough for the king of France. But no, he built them for his wife and mistresses. It was more than was necessary. Now obviously this is where this illustration breaks down because the Palace of Versailles ended up bankrupting the country of France and eventually led to the French Revolution. This was not built out of compassion, but done out of greed.

Today we are going to talk about God's superabundance. Jesus has just received some horrible news. He just found out his cousin, the man who baptized him, the man who came before him in ministry, John the Baptist, has been beheaded. In his overwhelming grief, he separates himself from the crowd, he gets in a boat and goes to the other side to be by himself. Now the crowd, does what most crowds do and they follow him. They demand to hear more of the words and the stories and the parables of this man Jesus. He sees this crowd and scripture says he has compassion. The word in Greek is *splanchnamonai* which means literally moved by and it has this really lovely connotation of the guts. His entrails are contorted and twisted. Moved by. This word only occurs twelve times in scripture and it always is referring to God or Jesus being moved by mercy for us. In the ancient world this word was used to describe how a woman's womb was contorted in labor.

We kinda understand this feeling right, we see something that causes us to feel compassion and you get that sick feeling in your gut. It's not a great feeling. You feel like you have got to do something or you can't even look at it because it causes that feeling in your gut and you want to look away. We understand this moment. And this is when Jesus stops and he cures the sick and he sits with them until the hour is late it says. And the disciples come up to him and they say "We have got to send them home. They have been here for too long. They have got to eat and we don't have anything to feed them." I love Jesus's answer here. He says, "You feed them." In the Greek the emphasis is on the word 'you'. It is an imperative that you feed them. And the disciples say, "No, we have nothing." So Jesus acts. They find five loaves and two fish among the crowd. Jesus takes it, he looks up to the heavens, he blesses it, he breaks it, he first gives it to the disciples, then the disciples share it with the crowd. They all eat until they are filled. The disciples gather together what is left and there are twelve baskets full after five thousand men and women and children have eaten.

A professor of mine, Sam Wells, calls this God's superabundance. I really like that term. God's superabundance. Does this wasteful to you? I bet some of us, have grandparents, or parents, or even you yourself survived the Great Depression. People from that time are not wasteful. This is not that way of thinking. This seems wasteful, does it not? Jesus is being downright wasteful with mercy. People need mercy.

Compare this story to when the Israelites are wondering in the desert and manna is falling from heaven. Do you remember this story? The people can go out everyday and pick up manna and they are supposed to do so. But if you try to take more than a day's worth of manna, it spoils. Except for the Sabbath, you can take enough the day prior to the Sabbath so you don't work on the Sabbath and it will magically stay good, because manna is magical, right? They couldn't take any more than they needed of this magical bread from heaven. They didn't have to actually work for, hadn't earned, didn't have to sow the seeds, plow the fields, bake, it just fell from the sky as the bread from heaven. God's mercy and compassion that fed them all that they needed. All that they needed to fill their stomachs and fulfill God's promise. See they couldn't hoard it, because you can't steal God's grace and mercy, it's a gift.

When you come for communion, which we all miss, there is a reason it is handed to you and you don't take it. Grace is a gift to be bestowed not snatched. When God chooses to give a superabundance, it's God's choice not something we can choose for God. When God has been moved by compassion, that gut feeling that can't be ignored and God desires to give the bread of heaven to feed God's people that need it superabundantly to overflowing. God has chosen to do so, because we need it. God's mercy is extravagant.

We are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus, so we cannot take God's grace, but we are called to share it. Jesus was in the middle of something very important, he was grieving for his friend. He was spending time alone. This can't be easy for him. It's important for him to go and process. We talk about self-care and how important it is for people that help our people. We talk about mental health breaks and he is interrupted. Life in ministry and life as a church in ministry comes with interruptions. We might be doing something really important. We might be working on something that we believe God is calling us to do. We might see a need or see something in the world that causes us to feel in our gut compassion for God's people.

In Henri Nouwen's book "Compassion", he makes the claim that that gut level compassion isn't something we have naturally as human beings. That it's an act of God's prevenient grace. Which isn't

quite how he phrased it, it's my Wesleyan phrasing of it. He states that naturally as human beings we are prone to competition and not compassion, but as being created in the image of God, we are grace given the ability to feel compassion for our fellow human beings. So when we feel that gut feeling of compassion that is God speaking to us. When we feel the need to look away to look away, we are turning our ear away from God, because we are being told to look and to act. We are being interrupted in our life. Sometimes as a church we are being interrupted. And when Jesus was interrupted, he cured their sick.

How are we being called to cure the sick in this world? If there was ever a time in the world, at least in our lives, that the church has been interrupted by need, it's now. In an economic crisis, a global pandemic, where over 150,000 people in America have died in the timespan of a few months, where there is record levels of unemployment, where there is depression and isolation, lockdowns, food insecurity, racial unrest, etc. It feels overwhelming at times, doesn't it? At times, the need feels almost too great, amen? You want to look away from this, right?

I was on a mission trip in Nicaragua a number of years ago, and the traffic laws of the country are more like loose guidelines. Whoever is faster and in a smallest vehicle pretty much has the right of way and we were driving on a bus. I remember covering my eyes and the lady next to me said, "It's really better if you just don't look." With that level of gut level compassion, it feels like it's better if we just don't look. And sometimes I think you have to take a break; you have to take care of yourself and step away from the news. Just like Jesus separated himself for a moment, but we can't allow ourselves to not look, to never be interrupted by the needs of God's people. Because if we don't look and we don't stop and heal the sick and we don't notice the hungry, we are not allowing God to give them that superabundance that's waiting for them. We are not allowing ourselves to receive the superabundance that God might have for us. We are withholding the bread of heaven from the world. We are choosing to live on scraps when we can have baskets full of leftovers.

This bread of heaven fills us in ways we can't express and it fed people on a hillside long ago and it can continue to fill us. When we feel that movement of compassion that is a precursor, a sign, that God is merciful, and God's mercy is superabundant.