

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
St. Mark 8:1-9

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Three days. Seven loaves. Seven baskets of leftovers. 4000 people.

Much has been made of these numbers, and much can be made of them. The people of God love to pour over them and decipher them, and it can be fun to do so. Three and seven are numbers representing holiness, divinity, unity, and completeness—as in the Trinity and the fullness of the week or the fulfillment of the week in the Sabbath. 4000 is broken down into its parts: 4 times 10 cubed—four corresponding to the whole creation, as in the four corners of the earth, and ten representing the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, the law and governance.

Many sermons have been prepared around these numbers and their significance. Often, when covering Biblical numerology, these sermons overlook the more important part of today's text.

"Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him." (Isaiah 30:18)

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in [showing mercy]. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old. (Micah 7:18-20)

These passages, from Isaiah and Micah, respectively, are fulfilled in your hearing by Jesus on the crowd of 4000. For there, He told his disciples, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat." Then, He proceeded to feed them miraculously from seven small loaves of bread and a few fish. This text is all about the mercy and compassion of God, especially as lived out in the person of the Son.

What drove Jesus to have compassion on the crowd? To put it plainly, it was Jesus Himself. He had been teaching them, instructing them, maybe even healing them, and they were hanging on every word of His. They might not have eaten anything in those three days they spent doing this, and Jesus, being God, knew it all. His teaching done, they would have to go home, and some of them, being with Him for so long, would have to go a long way, and having nothing to eat, they would have grown weary and fainted along the way. So, Jesus delighted to have compassion and mercy on them and feed them!

Now, don't misunderstand me. They likely didn't plan to be with Him for so long without food, and therein is the problem, insofar as there is a problem in the text. The people were away from home for so long and had no provisions. Such unpreparedness deserves the weariness and fainting that would have come with having no provisions—if you don't eat, you're going to grow weak! Such is a consequence of the sinfulness with which all of mankind is infected. But to a God who delights in showing mercy, this is nothing which cannot be overcome.

It's all symptomatic of life in this Vale of Tears. As you go headlong from one sin into the next, your sinful condition is made more and more evident to you. There is nothing you can do, either in planning how to get out of it or even getting out of it altogether yourself. You are lost, having to face the consequences of your sin, and the words of St. Paul are probably ringing in your ears right now: "The wages of sin," the consequence, as it were, "is death." (Romans 6:23)

Death is what you deserve for your sin. Weariness, fainting, and possibly even death is what the crowd deserved for having no provisions for the days, traveling home on an empty stomach.

But God exalts Himself to show mercy. Mercy is when you don't get what you deserve. A lenient judge is one who shows mercy by reducing a sentence for a crime, or eliminating it altogether. That's the kind of justice that God shows—that's the kind of Judge Jesus is—He eliminates the sentence for your sin.

In the case of the crowd upon which He had compassion, He demonstrated His mercy by feeding them all by way of seven small barley loaves and a few small fish. And their cups ran over to the tune of seven baskets full of leftovers. If that's not the overwhelming mercy of God, then nothing is.

In your case—in the case of all humanity—God exalts Himself in His show of mercy by sending the Son. God would not have the sinner die, Ezekiel exclaims (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11), so He Himself takes on the flesh and bone and blood of His creation, becomes one with Man, and assumes into that perfect flesh the sins of the world, and dies with them, shedding His blood as the payment. God died on the cross for and with the sins of the world. No, you do not get what you deserve for your sin, for you should be the one on the cross giving your life for your iniquity, but "the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6b)

No, you do not get what you deserve, and if that is not the overwhelming mercy of God, then most certainly nothing is. Once again, the words of St. Paul should be ringing in your ears: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." You do not get what you deserve: death for your sin; and that's mercy, but you receive the free gift of God in Christ Jesus, which is life, and that's grace—getting what you don't deserve. "For God...[had mercy on] the world," if you don't mind my editorial change, "that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that [he would be gracious so that] the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17)—again, an editorial change.

I will add that none of this is deserved. You don't, in any way, earn God's mercy and grace. Your kindness and mercy toward others, while expected and demanded, will not earn you any favor with a just God who requires perfection. For, while you may do good in one moment, in the next, you are not, and all the good that you do, because you struggle with your sinful condition, is like a filthy rag before the almighty justice of the Father. (cf. Isaiah 64:6)

So, one might be tempted to give the crowd some credit for Jesus' mercy by stating that He showed them compassion because they stayed with them for those three days. That, however would betray Jesus' own words in the text. Jesus had concern for their well-being, that they would be so hungry as to grow weary and faint on their way home, so He fed them. It would, likewise, betray what was written by the prophets, as you heard earlier, that God delights in showing mercy—it's who He is and what He does, apart from any worthiness or merit in yourself. You can only go so far to say that Jesus showed mercy to the crowd because they NEEDED to be shown mercy, having taking for themselves no provisions.

So, for you, that you don't get what you deserve—that God shows you mercy—is on all Him. As with the crowd, so for you, God delights in showing you mercy, not because you have somehow earned it, but because that is who God is and what He does. You can only go so far to say that you NEED to be shown mercy, because you are completely lost in your sinful condition. Therefore, thank God that He delights in showing mercy.

Likewise, He delights in being gracious—giving you what you don't deserve. In His divine compassion, He removes from you your iniquity and having placed it on His Son, He died with it. In place of that iniquity, He gives you life and salvation and a trust in Him which relies on Him for all that is good for you, and a holy desire for more. God has had compassion on you; He has shown you mercy to remove your sin from you as far as east is from the west. By faith, you cry out, "Yes! Amen! Give me more." And He delights in showing you grace, and so you are forgiven for all of your sins. And where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.