

A Piece of Cake
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
August 10, 2014
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Texts: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

Growing up, I was always one to watch carefully as my mother's delicious desserts were divided up and passed around the table. I kept my eyes locked on how the cake was divided or which cookies had the most chocolate chips. I carefully calculated in my mind which plate was the epitome of confectionary perfection and made up my mind *that* was the one for me. Sometimes I would forget that a scoop of ice cream would be added to the plate and once each person around the table had what they wanted, I would scan to see the size of the scoops given to my brothers in particular, just to be sure that they hadn't received a bonus scoop when the bottom of the gallon was reached. Did I mention that I have two brothers? Two older, stronger, louder brothers? Getting that coveted plate wasn't always, well, a piece of cake.

I imagine there might be a few others here who can relate to checking and double checking that you received your fair share of whatever it might be that is being shared among siblings, or cousins, or friends.

How *wonderful* it was though, to have the luxury and comfort to be able to worry my mind over the number of chocolate chips in my cookie; that I had such a privilege to be grumpy and sour for the rest of the day if I was given slightly less ice cream; that I could think I might suddenly be unloved merely because one of my brothers received the piece I deemed perfect in my mind.

What I was missing out on however, and I have a feeling I'm not alone in this, was that no matter how big of a piece of cake I was given, I was still going to be served some of the best dessert that I had ever had. It was never in question whether or not I was going to get a piece at all, but how quickly gratefulness was overcome by feelings of envy, bitterness, and uncertainty.

Sibling rivalry, bitterness, anger, all of these are present in our Old Testament lesson this morning. Many of us are not far from the feelings that Joseph's brothers must have had when their father showed favor for Joseph. How quickly this story moves away from joy and love, to anger and hatred, to a lack of peace, patience and understanding.

Nowhere in this OT passage did we read that Jacob did not love his other sons. We did not read that the brothers were incompetent shepherds or talent-less young men. Yes, we read of Jacob's great love and favor for Joseph, he was after all a child born late in Jacob's life, something special. And we have heard specifically of Joseph's unique gifts, but no words are written speaking negatively of the love for or gifts of the brothers.

All too often I think we look elsewhere to see if we, like the brothers, have been given the same "amount" of blessings as our friends, neighbors, or colleagues. We wonder why someone else was given that promotion. Or why we can't hit a ball as far as school all-star. Why someone we love received a life threatening diagnosis. Why it seems that everyone else is happy, except us. We get frustrated and hold grudges when we feel, less blessed. But oh do we miss out on the abundant blessings in our lives when we are so focused on the one's we see in the lives of others. God has promised to be with and bless His people, but God never said that the love and blessings poured out would look exactly the same for everyone. Nor did God promise that the timing would be the same, or that they would come in a neat, picturesque, problem-free package. Blessings come in all different shapes, sizes, colors, when we are young, when we are old, and often when we are not paying attention. With that being said, I invite you to take time today and during this week to look at your life, and into your heart, to look for the unique blessings and gifts you have been given. I hope that it will bring a sense of awe and peace that will still the storms of envy, impatience, and anger that we too often hold dear.

And don't we know all too well about the many figurative storms in our lives: grief, loneliness, loss, busy-ness and to-do lists, financial insecurity, physical and emotional pain, stress, injury; the list goes on and on. Storms of all kinds that draw us away from

the peaceful rest and reassurance we have in our Lord Jesus Christ. And the storms can come from anywhere at any time and will continue to do so.

Speaking of storms, let us consider the gospel reading for today. If I'm not mistaken, chapter 14 of the book of Matthew, from which our lesson today comes from, is the record of the longest day in Jesus' ministry, and what a long day it was. Chapter 14 opens with the beheading of Jesus' beloved friend, John the Baptist. Upon receiving the news, Jesus withdraws by himself. Not long after seeking to pull away, Jesus is rejoined by his disciples and leads them in feeding a crowd five thousand men, not counting women and children. He has compassion for them and heals their sick. Once again Jesus withdraws by himself, then as he is making his way back to join the disciples, Peter prompts Jesus to call him out onto the water. Jesus reaches out for Peter even in Peter's doubt, and calms the literal storm that was surrounding their boat. If that's not a "storm-packed" day, then I don't know what would be. Even the Son of God is not immune to the storms of this world.

And the storms of our lives are certainly there, aren't they? Waiting to draw us in, even if we are not readily aware of them. Peter's experience out on the water illustrates this quite well. The boat that the disciples are on in this passage is being battered by wind and waves. We read of the raging storm before Jesus is spotted making his way across the sea. And the wind hasn't died down when Peter steps out of the boat, but what does happen is that Peter tunes into the fact that the wind is whipping all around him, and on comes the doubt. Peter's attention has shifted from the security of his trust in Jesus. The distraction of the wind proves to be enough to shake Peter's faith-filled first steps out onto the water.

And how much are we like Peter, too, in that the storms and distractions of our lives pry at our faith and allow for doubt and a lack of trust to seep in? They shake our foundation or encourage our minds to wander away from the promise we have, given by the Lord our God, secured by Christ's death on the cross, and permeating all things through the power of the Holy Spirit. Like bitterness and envy, the multitude of trials and commotions in our lives can distract us from recognizing the blessings we have. They can hide love or twist patience into looking like silence, or even absence. They can bombard our souls into fear and desperation.

But yes, even in our doubt and distraction, we have a compassionate Savior who reaches out to us and lifts us up out of the water. One who tells us not to be afraid, and takes our hand to reassure us of his steadfastness.

It is with this in mind, that I encourage you as you focus on the blessings in your own life, that you have heart as you look beyond the things that distract you or pull you away from being fully aware of the awesome and life-altering love of the one true God. Find peace in the Creator's embrace and be filled with calming trust in the Almighty's sovereignty.

Life is anything but a piece of cake, but one thing is for sure: we are able to live each and every day with the knowledge that God loves us, has claimed us as His own, has redeemed us, reaches out for us, and has promised to be with us in all times and places. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.