

Pr. Steve's Homily.
Tshifulanani Church, July 28, 2024
Text: John 6: 1-21

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

When I first came to Lwamondo Parish 30 years ago, my hair was dark and gray, my beard was dark and gray. Now my beard is gone. There is only gray; the hair is disappearing. But I still believe in Black and White together! [Applause]

I bring you greetings from Peace Lutheran Church, from the members of our Partnership Committee whom you will get to meet later, and from our Bishop Jeff Johnson, who is happy for our Partnership work.

We will begin now with the Gospel, please.
[Reading of the Gospel in Tshivenda]

It is very important at the beginning of this text today that they were approaching the Feast of Passover. This is the central Celebration of Freedom in Judaism, when Hebrew slaves had been set free by God from their Egyptian oppressors.

The second book of the Bible is called Exodus. In English, we think Exodus means 'exit' or 'to escape'. But the Hebrew word is 'Yetsiah'. (Can you repeat that after me?) *Yetsiah*—that life will flourish—first used for the Nile River overflowing the banks—o the land became fertile and the crops could grow. This is *Yetsiah*. The sun rising is *Yetsiah*. A new day means life begins again. Bread rising is *Yetsiah*, so that life can flourish. When a mother's birth waters break, this is *Yetsiah*, new life flourishing. So, when the waters of the Red Sea part, the Hebrew people can go to freedom so that life may flourish.

This is so important to the work of Jesus. That is the context of today's text. Everyone understands the promise of freedom at Passover, so that life can flourish again.

Do you see in this text today how people loved to be with Jesus? 5000 people start coming to Jesus because they love to be with Jesus. One of the disciples asked, '*What will we do? How can we feed all these people?*' In the Hebrew tradition, Jesus asked the question back. Jesus said to Philip, 'What will you do?'

The text said that Jesus was testing him. I think Jesus is probing our hearts. Philip is honest. He says, '*I don't know.*' And that is the first response many of us give to Jesus' question, 'What will you do?' We all wonder, '*How will we feed and educate our children?*' And we face the big questions too. '*What will we do about racism in America and South Africa?*' Jesus asks us, '*What will you do? How will we strengthen women? What will you do? What will you do about gay and lesbian people? What will you do?*'

How many of us put ourselves down? We think we are unworthy of life, or we don't belong here, or we're not good enough for God. But God loves us as we are. God loves us more than we love ourselves. There is a word that says, 'Axios'='You are worthy' that everyone in our church needs to hear. Can you repeat that word 'Axios'? Now look at a neighbor next to you and look at their eyes and say, 'Axios', 'Axios', 'Axios'.

What will you do, you *Axios* people? In the text, Andrew finds a child with loaves and fishes. They bring this to Jesus, who is so happy because now he can work. He takes the loaves and fishes, blesses them and multiplies them. This is the key for today. God works with what we offer, whether it is small or great. God works with what we offer, because then our hearts are connected and committed. Then we care about what happens.

'Do everything in love.' Isn't that our watchword? *'Do everything in love.'* And the most precious gift you can offer God is the gift of yourself—each of us so precious to God. There is a beautiful saying which says, *'Who we are is God's gift to us. Who we become is our gift to God.'*

'Do everything in love.' And for those times that we forget that we are love, we have the assurance of Baptism which we celebrated today. When Martin Luther was discouraged, he would pound his chest and say, *'But I am baptized, I am baptized, I am baptized.'* *Axios.*

So the feast began—it was a taste of heaven. The people were happy. Plenty to eat, laughter with friends, happiness in God's presence.

But then the people had an idea. *'Let's make Jesus the bread-king. As long as he makes bread for us, we will follow him.'* Did you hear that in the text? Jesus disappears. He went to pray to reconnect with God because he wants to offer us another kind of bread which will reconcile us with each other. He said, *'We are worth it.'*

One of the special gifts of communion is the partnership we share which leads to understanding, wisdom and friendship and encouragement. How good when brothers and sisters dwell together in harmony and unity.

This work of Partnership is so delicate because when we're together it makes complete sense. When we're apart, it is more difficult. But I remember an old man I met on my first visit 30 years ago. It was a small village, and we couldn't stop to visit as we had planned. He offered 5 times and every time we said, 'No, we have to go.' Then he said, 'OK, but maybe the *Mahfuzi* will see me in his dreams.' And everytime I dream of him, I dream of all of you, for God has placed us in each other's hearts. And that is such a blessing.

At the very conclusion of the Gospel, the disciples are in a boat crossing the sea, and a storm occurs. Jesus walks on the water toward them, and what the text actually says, 'I am always with you.' 'I am.' I am—in every darkness. 'I am' is always with us.

There was another Rabbi who asked his disciples once, *“How can you tell the difference from the dark to the dawn?”* One of his disciples said, *“When you look at the horizon and you can tell the difference between an olive tree and a fig tree.”* The Rabbi said, ‘No’. Another disciple said, *“You look at the horizon and you can tell the difference between a dog and a goat.”* ‘No’, said the Rabbi. *‘When you can look into the eyes of a human being you have never met, and there you see a brother or a sister, then the dark is gone, and the dawn has begun.’*

My friends, remember: *“Axios. Make life flourish, Yetsiah.”* For we are children of God forever. *Yetsiah. Amen.*