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Ruth 1:8-9, 14b-16, 22; 2:1-3
Luke 9:10-17

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

“Go back.” The words of Naomi to her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth seem a strange way to welcome you to this Eleventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation.

“Go back.” Naomi’s plea was as understandable then as it is for us now. As deep as the affection was between them, Naomi believed the bonds of kinship, custom, language, nation, and tradition seemed to be more promising for their security and their future.

“Go back each of you to your mother’s house. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” (Ruth 1:8 *NRSV*)

Shall that become the clearest word spoken by this assembly? Shall our response to all that unsettles the church and threatens to divide humanity and destroy God’s creation be, “Go back? Go back and find your security, your hope, and promise in what is familiar to you.” Shall that be our message?

“Send the crowd away.” Jesus’ disciples reached a conclusion similar to Naomi’s as they came to the end of a day near Bethsaida. Yes, the crowd had experienced blessing in the presence of Jesus—in his announcement of God’s Kingdom arriving, manifest in acts of compassionate healing. Yet now the disciples thought it best to separate the crowd. It

was understandable—even commendable. There was an obvious lack of resources to feed such a large, hungry crowd.

“Send the crowd away.” We do understand the disciples’ request, don’t we? They were just thinking responsibly about capacity. Given the number of hungry people and the meager resources, the most generous thing they could ask Jesus to do was disperse the crowd. “Jesus, scatter the people so they might find their own food, their own security, and hope.”

So will that be our plea coming out of this assembly? Shall we assess our capacity as the LWF to respond to the migration of people, to the hunger for food and justice, for hope and salvation, and say, “Send the crowd away, Lord?” Shall our petition become “Give me this day my daily bread and help those who are hungry to find theirs?”

I find it very interesting that the disciples described being in a crowd of 5,000 people as a “deserted place.” How can that be? Was it only a reference to the lack of food? Some insightful students of scriptures have observed that it is unlikely that no one in a crowd of 5,000 packed a meal. At least the religiously-minded Jews in Jesus’ audience would have taken the precaution of bringing a supply of ritually clean food. But now their problem was eating that food in the company of others of uncertain moral and religious character who also had begun to follow Jesus.

One scholar wonders if it was not knowing the moral and religious status of those sitting nearby that made many reluctant to bring out whatever food they had with them.¹ Will that be what we want said of this assembly? That we have gathered on behalf of 70

¹ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 214.

million Lutheran Christians all over the world, but Stuttgart became for us a “deserted place?”

Ah, but did you hear Jesus’ command? Could it be that it is also spoken to us gathered for this assembly? “Make them sit down,” said Jesus. “Make them sit down in groups of about 50 each.”

In other words Jesus, is saying, “Do not go into your familiar retreating. Do not flee one another for your private enclaves, for the security of familiarity. Do not retreat to separated places that are impoverished by your fears, your resentments, your preoccupation with what you do not have, and your lack of faith in what God promises.”

Jesus’ command is to “Sit down, stay here and commune.” Jesus gathered them, assembled them, and crowded them together in one community. There would be no private dining, no separating and sending to satisfy one’s own hunger, no fearful fleeing one another that haunts so much of our lives today. They would eat as one body. No one would be excluded on account of ritual impurity, gender, social class, HIV and AIDS, poverty or wealth, language or race.

What had earlier sounded like a command from Jesus to his disciples, “You give them something to eat,” became the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise as he took the bread, looked up to heaven, broke it and gave it to his disciples to distribute.

And all ate and were filled. All were satisfied. Even God was satisfied, I believe. For the people were not simply fed. This is more than an example of just and equitable distribution of resources. In this meal, Jesus brought them into communion, into the life of one body... into *communio*.

It was no one-time event. Before Jesus died, he assembled his disciples once again for a shared meal, giving them his last will and testament, a new testament in bread and cup, the promise of his life, the forgiveness that frees them to be one body.

Because God provides the *communio* we can say, as Ruth did, “Your people shall be my people.” Stuttgart is not a deserted place. This is a joyful place where God is filling us and all will be satisfied.

Sisters and brothers, this is the center of this assembly and the LWF—Jesus Christ through Word and bread and wine bringing us into communion, into the life of one body. In this assembly Jesus, the Bread of Life sent from heaven, is present for you, making you a new creation in Christ, forgiving you, reconciling us to God and to one another, giving us the message and ministry of reconciliation.

Because “[Jesus] is our peace,” we will repent and ask for forgiveness from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers, trusting the promise that “in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” (Ephesians 2:14 *NRSV*)

May the witness of this assembly be a joyful confidence that God answers our prayer “Give us today our daily bread,” by giving abundantly, generously, and mercifully all that we and the world need. From this assembly let us not retreat into places of familiarity and security. Rather let us go courageously and confidently in the power of the Holy Spirit to be the Body of Christ, given for the life of the world.