

Unfailing Hospitality

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson, in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 3, 2008.

Taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. Matthew 14:19

Jesus is tired. He has just heard of the death of his cousin John the Baptist with whom he spent his earlier years in the wilderness preparing for his ministry. It was John who heralded his coming and now he is gone. All Jesus wants now is to go off to a quiet place to be alone with his loss. But that is not possible. His fame has reached rock star proportions and he is weary with so many seeking to be healed or to hear a word of encouragement from him.

Soon the crowd grows to five thousand and the disciples are embarrassed that they do not have enough to offer them to eat. They urge Jesus to send them off to find their own food. In Jewish culture it was considered very bad form to neglect to show hospitality to your guests. It would be very inhospitable to expect your guests to go find their own food. Jesus insists that they feed the crowd even though they only have five loaves and two small fish. What is that among so many? Jesus knows what he is doing. He takes the loaves and fish, offers a blessing and divides it among the disciples and orders them to share it with everyone else. In the end, everyone has plenty to eat with enough left over to fill twelve baskets.

This story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes is so important that it is recorded in all four of the gospels. Jesus breaking the bread and sharing it with the disciples is a foreshadowing of the Last Supper from which we have the Eucharist that we celebrate in remembrance of him. The significance of the twelve baskets of leftovers is that the twelve disciples are equipped with the bread of life to share with the spiritually hungry world. The Eucharist we celebrate here each week is our central act of worship Christians have kept faithfully for the past 2,000 years.

So, what really happened with feeding of 5,000 people with just a few loaves and fish? The skeptics won't accept anything that can't be explained, leaving no room for faith. Attempts have been made to explain that when the people saw that there wasn't enough food, they all took out what they had with them and shared it with those who had none. If that were the case, it would itself be a miracle. But, trying to explain this miracle or any others is missing the point. All of the miracles of Jesus give us a glimpse of God's kingdom. What this miracle tells us is that God's kingdom there are no limits. There are no restrictions. Everyone has a share in God's grace. As Jesus feeds the crowds who gather around him, he feeds us today with that same abundant grace. His authenticity teaches us to have compassion for all the people of God. Whenever we are fed with God's Spirit, we gain another glimpse of God's kingdom.

Notice what Jesus does not do. He does not invite only a select few, he invites all of them. He makes no distinction in regard to their gender or age, their religious membership nor is he concerned if they are illegal aliens. Jesus knows that there is enough compassion to feed even a very large crowd. Even if there are no limitations on God's grace, there are those who won't accept it. Are they too proud? Do they not want to be obligated? Or is it because they think they have no need it? Everyone needs God's love and compassion, whether or not we accept it is another thing.

Last week in downtown Boston I was approached by a derelict man asking for money. I wasn't even wearing my collar. People down and out asking for help is something I have dealt with all the years of my ministry. I listened to his story and gave him something. When confronted with the homeless and hungry I can't help but be skeptical of their story. With all the social services available, we wonder why they fend for themselves on the streets. We want to avoid being part of the problem and at the same time want to be part of the solution to poverty and hunger. It is up to all of us to take responsibility for the problem of hunger and not push it off on others. It is easy to fall into the pattern of thinking that the needs of the homeless are someone else's problem. There are those who object to the feeding programs for the poor because it only perpetuates the problem. Yes, it is true that if we don't feed the homeless, they will starve and go away. But where is God's grace in that? When Jesus asks the disciples to bring the people to him, it reminds that our job is to bring people to Jesus. When was the last time you invited some to church with you?

We are a nation of plenty and we are a people willing to help others in need. The irony is that in this nation of plenty, there are those with eating disorders who deny themselves food. They may be people we know but are unaware of their disorder. A high school neighbor of mine recently went public about her anorexia by inviting us to a public forum to hear her story. She shared with us how it affected not only her own well being and health but that of her whole family. Through years of personal and family therapy she has worked on her compulsions and self image to gain control of her life. I really admire her for her bravery in being willing to talk about it publicly knowing that it has touched others dealing with anorexia and bulimia.

The problem with so many Christians today is a kind of spiritual anorexia. I meet people all the time who are worried and depressed and have lost meaning in their lives and are spiritually starved. The challenge is to bring them to Jesus for a healthy spiritual life integral to their emotional and physical well being.

There are two sides to the practice of the Christian faith. There are private times when we need to be alone to examine our interior spiritual life and there are other times when we gather together in corporate worship and fellowship. Liturgy by definition is the work we do together in worship. When I was growing up the priest stood alone at the altar and did everything. It is so much better to have laity sharing in the celebration of the Eucharist. This is a community meal, not a private one. We do this together because Jesus asked to do it in remembrance of him. We bring our concerns here to God's altar as we gather around and receive the sacrament. It reminds us that we are all equal before God. Having the healing station here at the time of communion is an important part of the experience. This must always be a place where God's grace is known and received and shared. If not, we have no business being here.

To that, let the church say, "Amen!"