

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 2, 2015

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Giving Life to the World

“For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” You may have noticed that the theme of hunger is repeated in the gospel today. Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” Last week we heard the story of the abundant loaves and fishes and for the next two weeks, the Gospel of John continues to point to Christ as the sustenance we need.

From the Hebrews who were provided manna from heaven to survive the wilderness, to the early Christians in Ephesus given varying gifts to build the kingdom, God’s presence and provision is faithful. And yet we still don’t recognize the ways in which God gives us our daily bread. Perhaps what makes it bread from heaven is not so much that God gives us what we want, but gives us what we need. If we don’t see what God bestows upon us as a gift, we may conclude God isn’t answering our prayers. So we engage in a little manna insurance of storing up for ourselves, viewing our neighbor as a possible drain on our resource management. This, my friends, is the beginning of losing sight of the kingdom and God’s call to us.

The second reading today from the book of Ephesians speaks to this very issue. Most likely written by a disciple of Paul’s teachings, this letter addressed a community mired in conflict as the believers gathered to establish their Christian identity. Jews and Gentiles once divided now were called to form the body of Christ and to establish unity despite their differences. Walking in their own form of wilderness, these early Christians wandered far from Christ’s teachings as they staked claims in their own traditions. An expansive vision for Christian living called them to trust that God was doing something new and would provide what was needed to sustain them.

Ephesus was a major urban area with a diverse population, including many trades, religious groups, and social classes. Appealing to this fledgling church to renew their purpose of reconciliation and peace, they were reminded that Christ followers are both called and equipped. United in one faith, one Spirit, one God, each had been given gifts to accomplish this task. Despite God’s provision, the young Christians had lost sight of their calling.

Have we done a better job in the modern church to live out our mission? We too have been charged to be a beacon of hope and reconciliation for a divisive world. God, whose very nature implies unity, creates us for connection, yet divisions still exist in the midst of our faith communities. When churches confuse unity with uniformity, we miss out on the richness that diversity brings. Why else would Christ have equipped us to be apostles and prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers? To live in the tension of these differences requires humility and gentleness, patience and bearing with one another in love. These gifts of the Spirit are manna from heaven given to build up the body of Christ.

Lest we think we have come so far in the modern church, I heard this funny story from a colleague. During seminary, she served at a parish with both a female rector and associate. One day while on vacation, she took her family to church and the rector was a male. As the procession came by, her four year old daughter exclaimed with delight, “Mommy, I didn’t know

boys could be priests!” Out of the mouths of babes, we still struggle with divisions. Whether it is race or gender or sexuality or political persuasion our differences can create a sense of isolation from one another. Yet they are our best opportunity for spiritual growth and maturity. United in our differences we can be a witness to God’s vision for the world.

In 2012, when the conflicts were playing out in the Episcopal Church, I was involved with a committee formed in the diocese named Dayspring. This group was created to address the issues that emerged as remnant congregations returned to their buildings from which they had been excluded years prior. Much of my work on this committee included walking beside those dealing with loss and disillusionment at an institution that was supposed to promote reconciliation and peace. Dayspring’s very name implied a new beginning and my job was simply to give words of hope and encouragement to those seeking renewal of God’s presence and provision. Each time we reach out with inclusion and love, we are building up the body of Christ. In essence, we become someone else’s manna. We are all hungry for a place where our beliefs and practices can be congruent. God wants that place to be the church.

The kind of unity to which we are called was demonstrated with the African concept of Ubuntu that Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu promoted in the struggle against apartheid. This is an ethic that expresses itself in interdependence and relationship. A person is most fully defined through unity with others and is diminished when others are humiliated or oppressed. There is a connectedness that means no one lives in isolation. Speaking the truth in love, Tutu confronted disunity and exclusion with Christ’s message of reconciliation.

In this Ubuntu ethic, we are resurrected from our losses, so that we can extend our hand to someone else who has lost their balance. Reaching out in love to those who would otherwise be excluded or marginalized expands our unity and matures our own faith. Tutu says, “You are rich so that you can make up what is lacking for others. You are powerful so that you can help the weak. To participate in the joys and burdens of another, that is God’s plan for humanity.” We need not store up our manna, as sharing the gifts we have been given expands us rather than diminishes us.

This year at Holy Cross, we have established as one of our priorities, to grow spiritually as individuals and as a church. Our lesson this morning invites us to mature our faith by trusting in God’s presence and provision and using those gifts to cross dividing lines. We begin by taking one step from wherever we are to deepen and broaden how we live out our calling. I ask each of you to think about the gifts you have been given and how you might be called to use these gifts for the building up of this body of Christ.

Do you recognize what has come down from heaven to you to give life to the world? Can you envision God doing something new right here at Holy Cross? God has a calling for this church and for its individual members knit together in Christ’s love. We are to expand our unity, to grow in our faith, and speak truth to exclusion. When we reach out to the brokenhearted we become that beacon of hope and reconciliation to a divided world. God give us the daily bread we need to live into this important calling. Amen.