

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

July 26, 2015

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The Hungry Heart

You satisfy the hungry heart with gift of finest wheat. Come give to us, O Saving Lord, the bread of life to eat. Amen

If you have been around the church a while, you know that it is rare to find an event that doesn't involve food. In fact I can't think of one that hasn't included at least a little treat! From coffee hour to Chili cook-offs to Grill and Chill, we are well fed indeed. Even our service to others, such as sandwich making and our ministry of food cards, assures that no one walks away from Holy Cross hungry.

While many come to church not knowing the source of their hunger, fellowship and food have a way of saying "welcome, this is a place of nourishment, a place of abundance!" Some find their sustenance in prayer and Bible study; others are fed by serving in outreach and mission. Most of us are nurtured by the friendships formed in community. But what lies just beneath an ordinary church life is the unforeseen possibility that the miraculous is at work. Christ's presence made manifest in our words and deeds can transform a hungry heart into bread for the world.

Today we heard the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle narrative found in all four gospels. On the face of it, this is a story about sharing bread and sharing love. After all, much of Jesus' time was at table with ones considered forbidden and unclean. His inclusive ministry reached out to the suffering whose needs were often overlooked, even by the religious leaders of their community. But it would be shortsighted to interpret this account as a moral teaching about dividing resources and good deeds. This miracle of multiplication was a prophetic sign of the abundant life God offers, surpassing any human expectation.

As Passover approached, Jesus brought his disciples to a place apart. But the desperate crowds followed them to the hillside. Moved with compassion, Jesus tasked his disciples to find food for the gathering. Five loaves of bread and two fish would never be enough. Jesus blessed and broke the loaves and distributed the food with baskets to spare. This miracle of abundance satisfied their need and foreshadowed Jesus as the bread of life broken for the world.

We don't hear much about miracles today. Some would explain this passage as a story of generosity inspired by a loving leader. In a culture driven by the notion that we make our own way, trusting our needs to another would mean ultimate vulnerability. With a lens of scarcity if I give to you, then I must lose in return. It is difficult to relax our grip if we feel there will never be enough.

When life gets hard and things don't go according to plan, it is instinct to focus on self-preservation. We pull away isolating ourselves from the very support we need. Christ invites us to come just as we are, to be fed and blessed, so that we may become a blessing for others. This is the path of our transformation. We must be able to imagine our ordinary lives can be used for extraordinary purposes.

Sara Miles, in her book *Take This Bread*, described herself as a confirmed atheist, a liberal journalist who covered political and social revolutions around the world. She lived her life with intensity, always on the move, never fully planted anywhere. In her forties, as the political landscape changed and her job ended, so did her troubled marriage. Over the next two years Sara lost two dear friends to illness and then her father died suddenly. As her life became untethered, she experienced unspeakable despair.

Stepping into a church she was passing by, Sara admits that she was not looking for God, only following some sort of yearning. There in this church building, she felt an odd sense of belonging amidst a group of complete strangers. As a hand held out bread to her and she heard the words “The body of Christ,” Sara described a visceral experience of being healed. For Sara, religion was not about prayers and piety; it was about hunger, real people and being fed.

That communion bread turned into bags and bags of groceries piled on the altar as Sara began St. Gregory’s first food pantry. The more she learned about Christ, the more she gave her whole heart to this calling. Providing food for the poor and marginalized, there was something sacred in the ritual of giving food and sharing stories with these unlikely churchgoers. Some became volunteers as the food pantries expanded to more than a dozen. Finding purpose and meaning in relationship to Christ and to her companions on the journey, Sara was restored to a new life.

The pattern of this story and the miracle narrative is instructive for us. God invites us to come with our hunger to be filled with Christ’s presence and compassion and to become more and more attuned to our baskets overflowing. Sometimes it is not until things have been stripped away that we even acknowledge our hunger. In some ways our hearts are broken open to receive God’s abundant care. In our community of faith, as it says in Ephesians, we are rooted and grounded in love. Then we are sent into the world, trusting that whatever we have to give in the moment, will be more than enough.

In a period of transition, Holy Cross could easily have become mired in fear and a sense of scarcity. But we have been abundantly blessed with imagination and hearts open to unforeseen possibilities. As we go about our mission of the care and feeding of souls, we would do well to remember that Christ’s love only multiplies as we give it away. Staying focused on God’s call to us, we will be given the power to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine.

Jesus invites each of us to come to this table to be nourished with God’s blessings, preparing us to share the blessing as we receive it. With God’s provision our giving can be miraculously abundant and we need not fear that there won’t be enough. Come to us O saving Lord with the bread of life to eat. And send us we pray to be bread for a hungry world. Amen