

The Food of Hand and Heart A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (A)

And all ate and were filled. Matthew 14:20

A favorite short story of mine is one entitled Breakfast, by John Steinbeck. Written in the first person, the story is more like a remembrance, something lifted from the author's past but still possessing the power to delight and inspire. It's set in a California migrant camp during the Great Depression; and it speaks of our most basic human need—the need for physical sustenance, for that which nourishes and restores the body. But it also speaks of an equally essential need—our need for community, and for sharing of life's sustenance, for the food that restores and gladdens the soul.

Early one morning, the story begins, Steinbeck comes upon a family of migrants who have only recently stirred from their tent and are about to have breakfast. As he approaches, he sees a young woman beside a stove, poking at the fire, opening, and closing the oven door, while at the same time balancing a child in one arm who is feeding at her breast. The writer pauses for a moment, not wanting to interfere, he says, with her 'practiced and precise' motions, nor with 'the gracefulness of her movements.'

'I was close now,' he writes, 'and I could smell frying bacon and baking bread, the warmest, pleasantest odors I know. From the east the light grew swiftly. I came near the stove and stretched my hands out to it and shivered all over when the warmth struck me.' It's then that he notices two other figures, an older and a younger man dressed in new dungaree coats 'with the brass buttons shining.' They both welcome the visitor just as the food is being brought out and while plates, forks, and tin cups are being set on a large packing box in front of them. 'When the smell of that hot bread came out,' Steinbeck writes, 'both men inhaled deeply.'

After that, they invite him to join them for breakfast. The conversation is sparse, mostly about how the two men (probably a father and his son) have recently gotten work picking cotton, with enough money to afford their new set of clothes as well as their breakfast. 'We been eating good for twelve days now,' the younger man says with sheepish pride.

When all the food is set out, they squat down beside the box. The young woman joins them, her baby tucked under the crook of her arm still sucking at her breast. 'We filled our plates, poured bacon gravy over our biscuits and sugared our coffee.' The older man filled his mouth full and he chewed and chewed and swallowed. Then he said, 'God Almighty, it's good'; and he filled his mouth again. . . . 'We all ate quickly, frantically, and refilled our plates and ate quickly again until we were full and warm. The hot bitter coffee scalded our throats. We threw the last little bit with the grounds in it on the earth and refilled our cups.'

Yet for all their primal enjoyment, it's more than mere satisfaction that they feel as they get up from their breakfast; there's a sense of hopefulness as well. It is, it seems, the food of renewal and of promise that they've feasted on too. Steinbeck writes: 'There was color in the light now, a reddish gleam that made the air seem colder. The two men faced the east and their faces were lighted by the dawn. And I looked up for a moment and saw the image of the mountain and the light coming over it reflected in the older man's eyes.'

In today's Gospel, Jesus likewise sets such a satisfying table of hope and promise before the hungry crowd. For the multiplication of the loaves (as it's called) is not just a physical feeding

either; it is a moment of renewal as well, a feast of joy and spiritual delight for a people so often described as sheep without a shepherd. It is heavenly food on which we too can chew and chew and swallow and declare, 'God Almighty, it's good!' It's the bread of love and mercy; it's the food of truth that like the morning light rises across the mountain, a light reflected in the hungry and lost and searching eyes of our fellow creatures.

Added to this is the joy that such food is shared, given, and received with generous and loving hearts. We miss sometimes, I think, the fact that Jesus doesn't distribute the loaves and the fishes himself; but rather he gives them to his disciples to give to the people. And we can assume that each person in that crowd in like manner does the same. It's not a handout, it's a meal, it's a communion. The satisfaction comes not simply from consuming but in partaking, from being filled and from filling each other with the living presence of Christ.

If there ever was a time, dear friends, when such a sharing, such a partaking, such a communion of truth and love is needed it's now. We've gone far too long clutching our own comforts. We've thought far too much only about our individual selves. We've kept the bread of justice and hope too long away from the rest of God's people. I really do wonder if the great struggles that we're now facing socially, medically, economically and our great difficulty in resolving them, are not in some ways the result of our unwillingness to sit down at the table of true fellowship (even if it's a packing crate beside a migrant's tent), and there humbly and genuinely and joyfully to give to each other the food of hand AND heart, the food we all need both to survive AND to be saved.

At the end of his story, Steinbeck bids farewell to the family who's shared their breakfast with him, thanking them for their hospitality. 'O.K. Glad to have you,' the older man waves and calls out after him. Yet the author doesn't leave alone; he carries with him a feeling he can't quite explain, though it's something he can't ever forget. 'I know some of the reasons why it was pleasant,' he says. 'But there was some element of great beauty there that makes the rush of warmth when I think of it.'

If we do nothing else with the rest of our lives nothing else for our families, our community, our country, or our world but seek to discover in ourselves and to give to each other that same element of great beauty, that same rush of warmth and power and peace that the Lord Christ gives to us, then we will have lived a full life in the spirit. And then the road ahead, I believe, will be marked by grace. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +