

29 July 2018
Whitsuntide X
St John 6: 1 - 21

A few miles up the coast from Joppa and the modern city of Tel Aviv, Pontius Pilate over-saw the construction of a 50,000 seat sports arena, modelled after the great coliseum in Rome. In time, like Singapore here in western Michigan, it was completely buried by sand and remained hidden until the 1990s when the excavation work began. As in Rome, here admission was free, and the government handed out loaves of bread to everyone who came to see the events of the day.

Rome had instituted this policy of free bread, and it worked to their advantage. People received free food, but in turn, the authorities were buying the loyalty and dependency of the people. People who had food were not likely to rebel, and they also understood that if they did not agree with the policies of the Emperor all the way down to the local magistrates, the free food could be instantly shut off until they complied.

Now, I tell you this because a few miles inland, on the bank of the Sea of Galilee we have the setting for this morning's Gospel passage. We just heard and read the report of this day - a huge crowd, it was late in the day, and Jesus didn't want to send them away hungry and perhaps light-headed. And we know the miracle that occurred.

We know the miracle, but it remains an unsolved mystery, subject to debate. Did Jesus take the small amount of food given to him by the young boy and miraculously multiply it? Perhaps. That is, after all, the traditional interpretation. Or, did the miracle occur when people saw what the boy did, and how Jesus graciously accept his gift, and they changed from selfishly hoarding what they had to open their hearts, minds, and hands, and also share with one another?

We don't know, and frankly, I'm not certain it matters because leading people to move from selfishness to sharing a miracle.

But there is far more to this passage than a report of the day's events. First, we see a radical difference between Jesus and the government policy. The government, as I said, was being self-serving, using bread as a carrot and stick held over the people, to get them to comply with what they wanted, and to buy their loyalty.

Jesus responded out of compassion, and to use a contemporary phrase, with no strings attached. There was a need and he responded.

We should also keep in mind that some time after this day's miracle, many of the people watched as Jesus and the disciples sailed across the Sea of Galilee to the opposite shore. Suddenly, one person or a small group, started jogging around the coast. Others quickly followed, and they became a welcoming committee when the boat landed. Jesus said, you didn't come to hear me or God's message for you; you just came for a free meal. And that circles straight back to the temptations Jesus faced in the Wilderness after His baptism. Satan suggested imitating the Romans - give them free food and buy their loyalty and support.

We have taken to heart the example set by Jesus. Whenever we see someone, or a group of people, in need, we respond - no strings attached. No strings, no conditions, and often, without expectations or concerns about the out-come. We are simply doing the right thing because sharing what we have with others is a true form of Christian stewardship. Here at All Saints, we do it through our monthly support of Christian Neighbours, the blue boxes that Carol Garvelink placed in the Parish Hall for contributions of food, and in many other ways. The list of our care for others is extensive.

I find it a bit sad when I hear a negative voice whenever someone mentions the phrase, 'check book Christianity or outreach'. I find it sad because sometimes the best thing we can do is contribute money. Marie of Christian Neighbours and her co-workers have an almost miraculous ability to convert cash into many times over the warm clothing, food, and supplies than we could provide if we went shopping on our own. In our culture, there is nothing wrong, and there is everything right, with check book Christianity, provided that we don't stop there. For those who feel called to service, there are plenty of opportunities for hands on experiences such as packing the Thanksgiving food hampers or going on a crop walk, or the diocesan sponsored domestic and foreign mission trips. There are many, many more opportunities - and we support them. Generous giving is the work of God's people. Period.

Perhaps you remember Maslov's triangle representing the human hierarchy of needs. At the bottom, the most basic, are the things we need for survival - food, water, clothing, and shelter. That's the basic level for just plain surviving to the next day. After that, the need for safety. Is that the work of the church? Yes, at least in part.

What could be more imitative of Jesus than to provide a safe and welcoming place? That's one reason we make our church available to 12 step and other groups, and keep the doors unlocked, quite literally, for those who want to get away from the world for a few moments of quiet contemplation. But it is also our sacred work to provide a place that is safe for conversation, discussion, and compassionate disagreement of ideas. Few things are more hurtful than a retort that another person's ideas are wrong.

Remember how Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, asking for more information. Jesus welcomed him; they discussed spirituality and God's love. We imitate that! Few things are more hurtful than an instant dismissal of someone's beliefs, snarled in anger and contempt. We don't learn that from Jesus, and it is wrong.

The next rung up is our need to be loved and to belong to someone or something greater than ourselves. And that is truly the work, the sacred task of every Christian. That is the task of the church - to love everyone who comes in the door, and do it without qualifications or restriction. Jesus sets the example of feeding the heart - welcoming children, talking with women outside his own family, spending time with all sorts of people. That is the right sort of love put into action. I have often spoken about how loneliness is the root cause of most illness and death. Many people have friends and followers on social media, but no one with whom they can talk or share a cup of coffee. Many older people go for upwards of four solid weeks without connecting with another person outside of a business transaction. Not surprisingly, many older men who have lost their wife, die suddenly of what physicians have identified as a broken heart syndrome.

No one ever wakes up one morning and decides, "I'm going to become a drug addict or an alcoholic, starve or eat myself to death." Rather, the pain in their life - emptiness, loneliness, not belonging - is so great that they resort to self-destructive lifestyles in an attempt to cover up and mask the pain.

We must feed hungry hearts as much as empty stomachs. We must clothe people in love, just as we do with garments.

I was stunned early last week to read an article that this loneliness and lack of connection is considered so great in the United Kingdom that the government is going to spend \$41 million dollars over the next four months to fix the problem of loneliness. At first, it seems like a very good thing, but when we reflect on it further, we begin to see that the scheme has been proposed

because, quite frankly, the church has not been feeding the emotionally hungry. It is an indictment of the church.

And yes, I am keenly aware this is happening in the United Kingdom, but when we look around, we see the emotional problems are here as well - loneliness, suicide, substance abuse, violence, road rage, and more. Emotionally empty people can become angry, and in our culture it doesn't take too much of a nudge to result in yet another school or shopping mall shooting. And other emotionally empty and angry people double-down by advocating more guns.

On Judgement Day, I fear individuals and congregations will be standing before Jesus and found wanting. We were commanded to Feed My Sheep. Just as there is a divine trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - there is a human trinity to be fed - mind, body, and spirit.

We have work to do, and we can't sluff this off to government or someone or something else. It is our task, our calling, our vocation, our work.

As a very young clergyman, Deitrich Bonhoeffer addressed this challenge, and I believe he is right.

He said, "The Church is Eternal. She must Not Retreat. In the present age, she stands, not at the boundaries where human power gives out, but in the middle of the village."