

B Proper 12
 St. Stephen's, Belvedere
 July 26, 2015
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The Picnic Hamper Dilemma

When hungry people come to Jesus, -- he feeds them.

Let's not overlook the obvious in today's gospel lesson. It really is as simple as this: (lift up the bread) When hungry people come to Jesus, he feeds them. Go and do likewise. Amen.

This is really all that needs to be said about today's gospel story. But being a preacher.....I will go on, even though perhaps it will only detract. There is a Zen koan, "Shakamuni holds up a flower," that says that word had gone around that the Buddha was going to give a very important address. So on the day and time appointed great crowds of expectant people came to hear what the Buddha would say. There was a reverential hush as the Buddha ascended into the pulpit. The Buddha held up a flower; then he sat down.

(What did the Buddha say????) I am not nearly so eloquent—or chaste—as the Buddha. So I shall have to use many more words to try to say what the Buddha said with a flower—and Jesus with a loaf of bread—in a far a more eloquent manner.

(Today's gospel is a kind of koan for the life of the world—and for the life of our souls.) The central ritual of Christian worship from the very beginning has always been to replicate in a stylized way what Jesus does in today's gospel: confronted with the hunger of the world, he takes a loaf of bread, gives thanks for it, breaks and shares it with all who are present. .. Pretty simple. After 2,000 years we are still doing this every Sunday—and hopefully in our lives metaphorically—every day, day by day—sharing, feeding the hungry of the world.

For weeks now I have been drawn to the petition in the prayer with which we began our worship. I've been turning it over in my mind and heart, and it has several times entered into conversations that I have had. The petition is that—what we asked—is that God would give us his mercy "that we might so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things that are eternal." This is like an ancient version—prayed annually by the church on this Sunday since before the 5th century—of "don't sweat the small stuff." Remember what is most important. Focus! Or, as it is expressed in a collect for another Sunday of the year: "amid all the chances and changes of this life, may our hearts ever there be fixed where true joy is to be found." I SO need this constant reminder!

Henry David Thoreau said of his retreat to Waldon Pond: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and to see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

I come to church each week for the reason that Thoreau says that he went to the woods: because I wish "to live deliberately... and not, when I come to die, discover that I had not lived." I come to worship to be reminded that, with God's mercy, I might "so pass through things temporal that I lose not the things eternal."

This distinction between "things temporal" and "things eternal" is made in another way by David Brooks in his bestselling book, "The Road of Character,"(which I know that some of you have read because one of you passed on to me your copy, signed by David Brooks when he spoke at the Civic Center a few

months ago.) David Brooks opens his book by distinguishing between what he refers to as resume virtues and eulogy virtues. He characterizes these as “Adam I” and “Adam II”. Adam I characteristics are the sorts of things we would like to appear on our resume when we go looking for a new job—how industrious we are, what our accomplishments have been, our Grade Point Average, and so on.

Contrasted with these resume virtues are the more enduring and personal qualities of Adam II: trustworthy, generous, kind, thoughtful, and so on—what Brooks thinks of as “eulogy” qualities in contrast to resume achievements. Adam II qualities are what we tend to lift up and remember when we express our regard for someone whose life on earth has come to an end. These are those aspects of that person’s life which touched and shaped the sort of person we ourselves might wish to become. For we become like those whom we admire.

“We live in a culture that nourishes Adam I, the external Adam, and neglects Adam II,” the inner Adam, laments Brooks. The church exists, I believe, to nourish Adam II, the inner Adam (or, the Inner Eve), the eulogy virtues. The road to character lies very close to the path of faith.

Both the road to character and the path of faith call for making authentic choices between what is of passing interest, on the one hand, and what is of enduring value, on the other hand....Which is what brings us back to today’s gospel story, which is (as Malcolm has noted, relates the only miracle of Jesus attested to by all four of the gospels.

When I was a child we had a big picnic hamper made of woven wood with a hinged stained wood top that my mother on Sundays in the summer would fill with all the picnic fixings for a family of seven, and after church we would take it with us in the boat to the beach where we would spread out a blanket on the sand, and have a lovely picnic.

It is a picnic scene in today’s gospel-- a large crowd comes to hear Jesus in the wilderness, and Jesus, seeing their hunger, asks Philip: “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” The narrator of this story notes that Jesus asked Philip this in order to test Philip, for Jesus already know what he was going to do.

I love this little insight inserted by the narrator, to give us a clue as the mindset of the protagonist, of Jesus, and what is REALLY going on.

Philip in the story proves to be a perfect stand-in for ourselves by completely missing where Jesus is going with this. For Philip immediately protests: “Half a year’s salary would not buy enough bread for each of them to have a little!”

(Isn’t this what we tend to say when we are confronted with the hunger of the world, the mountain of violence, the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War, our jails stuffed with more black men than ever were shackled in slavery? We feel it is overwhelming. We feel that there is nothing we can do with the little we have—the little time, the little resources.)

Jesus, however, instead of joining Philip in his despair, picks up on the meager but total offering of a child who has 5 loaves and 2 fish. (Perhaps the boy had been hoping to sell them to make a few coins....?)

In Jesus hand’s, the loaves are lifted to heaven and thanks is given. Then the boy’s loaves are broken and shared among all those who are present, sitting in flowerbeds all over the hillside.

Let me ask you: faced with the multitude of the hungry people of the world, when you see a small child moved to offer all that he has—does it not move you to consider opening your own picnic basket to share

at least some of what you have with others—and perhaps to receive some of what they are willing to share with you? This is how we end our self-imposed isolation. This is how we become human beings—mench.

Is it not possible that something like this is what might have happened on that hillside with Jesus—that multitudes were miraculously moved to open their picnic baskets to share with those others whom they came suddenly to recognize as their neighbors....? Could it be that this is how 5,000 were miraculously fed with 5 loaves and 2 fish—and there were 12 basketsful of leftovers?

Do we not have eyes to see those around us who are giving everything—indeed, sometimes even their lives—to meet the hunger of the world—the refugee mother, doctor without borders, the Episcopal Relief and Development staff person in Yemen, the staff case worker from Hilarita Apartments who brought the children to Camp Create... Many of them anonymous—but when we are given eyes to see what they do, does it not move us to unlock the picnic hampers of our lives, of our time, of our financial resources, of our attention? And this brings us closer to meeting the hungers of the world—and in doing so to find the nourishment for which our own souls are starving.

When a journalist pointed out to Mother Teresa that the few dying indigent people she collected from the streets of Calcutta were just a drop in the ocean, she replied with a twinkle in her eye: “Yes, but without my drop the ocean would be smaller.”

The same is true of my drop, and of yours: without them ocean of God’s love would be smaller. A few Saturdays ago, Missy Leather offered us a workshop on bread-baking. I would like to think of our worship as the same: a workshop in bread-baking at which we are fed, and go forth better equipped to feed others. Give a person a loaf, and they can eat for day; but teach them to bake, and they can eat and feed others for a lifetime.

Jesus, when confronted with the hunger of the world, takes loaves, returns thanks for them, breaks them and shares them with all who are present.

We can do the same. And so experience the things that are eternal.