

Sunday July 29th, 2018
10th Sunday after Pentecost

PRAYER: O God of grace and infinite goodness, you nourish us with the bread of life and sustain us with the peace that sets our longing hearts at rest. You fill our cup with kindness; it overflows with the bounty of your all-encompassing care. You chose to dwell among us and in us through our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We praise you and adore you, O God of us all. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us of how we can please God for it is written, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” Hebrews 13:16

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, you know all things and are not destroyed; you understand all things and are not desolate. For that which is destroyed you re-create, and that which is made desolate you restore.

How we envy your strength, O God. And how we despair of our fragility! Often what we know condemns us, confuses us, and conquers us. Often what we understand is so overwhelming that we run from it, so isolating that we abandon it, so incomplete that we surrender it. Intellect strives to govern the heart, and the heart rebels; the heart struggles to rule the intellect, and the intellect resists. Common sense contends with sentiment, they vie for control. Little do they realize that neither of them alone is sufficient.

O God, we are like the Joabs (King David’s nephew and army general) of our day. Sometimes we are loyal to our emotions, but only until our hearts begin to break; then we become hard to guard them from harm, never minding the injury our hardness inflicts. Then, at other times, our reason reigns supreme, but often at the cost of being only half of who we are. Unable to link thought and feeling, practicality and personality, it is not long before we have murdered a wayward Absalom, against the command of love.

Make us whole, Lord, and we will be strong. Send to us, as to David, your messenger. Remind us through her that life is short, that death approaches, that there is no time for the outcast to remain outside us, for the exiled to remain beyond us, for the banished to remain against us. Your word will open the way between our head and our heart, that we might extend our hands without judgment and without folly. Your word will enable us to re-create what has been destroyed and restore what has been made desolate. Yes, speak to us your word and, unlike Job, we shall try to find a way to deal gently with Absalom-for your sake and ours.

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John 6:1-21
“They Just Don’t Get It”

Some time ago, there was a little story in the Reader’s Digest that said... “For several weeks an electric sign outside a church in our town advertised the parish’s annual supper. It was to be an all-you-can-eat sausage feast with mashed potatoes, green beans, sauerkraut, coleslaw and homemade pie. The very next morning after the event, the church sign had been changed. One succinct word now appeared: “B-U-R-P!” (Life in These United States, by Mary McGregor)

Someone had a sense of humour. Something happens to most of us at all-you-can-eat buffets. For a flat fee, and ask the regulars and they will tell you which buffets are the cheapest; anyone who goes, can eat as much as they want, or more accurately what they can handle. At meals such as this, caution often gets thrown to the wind. People who otherwise would show restraint, get carried away. I am just as guilty of this as anyone, but I do confess that I find of late I am not so enamored with buffets anymore.

Mostly, I don’t like the subtle pressure I put on myself to cram as much as I can into my already rotund physique. However, despite my best intensions, like so many of you, when I go to one of these overindulgent feasts, I feel compelled to “Get my money’s worth”, even if I do pay for it later, and I am not talking about the bill. There is something about food that triggers our more basic instinctive behaviour, although some of it is surely learned behaviour.

When we see an abundance of food we take as much as we can. We see or hear the words, “free sample” and we think it’s an invitation to a full course meal. When there is a scarcity of food in our homes we panic, wondering what we will eat. Although, it is very funny when, usually our kids, look in our full fridges and declare to everyone that there is nothing to eat. Usually that means there is nothing they like, such as junk food, to eat.

On a related note: did you know that “Food Security” is one of the most critical issues facing the majority of people in this world? Millions of people do not know when they wake up in the morning if they will get a meal that day. And we dare to complain when our favourite ice cream is out of stock.

In Jesus’ day, food was a serious issue. Most people in Jesus’ day lived in a precarious situation with food. Crops were always at the mercy of drought, insects like locusts, and plant diseases. Growing crops, catching fish, raising animals: was very labour intensive, and yields were often small. The price of food commodities varied wildly, and what food was available, was often confiscated by the Roman soldiers, or the political elite of the society, or those with the deepest pockets.

Being hungry was a regular experience for people in Jesus’ day. Everyone knew what it was like to go to bed with an empty stomach. Knowing then the critical issues about food in Jesus’ day, you can understand why the miracle of the feeding of the multitude is one of the rare miracles recorded in all four gospels. It’s like the gospel writers heard this story, or experienced it themselves, and went “Wow!”

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Not only did the people get something to eat, but they were given as much as they wanted. They could gorge themselves on what was provided. Jesus opened up an all you can eat buffet. And then there were leftovers; twelve baskets worth representing the twelve tribes of Israel. You and I we eat leftovers all the time, but this was rare in Jesus' day. Food spoiled quickly without refrigeration or salting, so you ate it when it was available. It was so scarce at times that no one left any on their plates, except perhaps the wealthy.

I always wondered what happened to the leftovers. Was it given to needy families? Surely it was not just thrown away; no one threw out good food. Jesus said that nothing was to be wasted, but still we are not told what happened to the leftover food. But I am getting ahead of myself. You all know the story perhaps. John tells us that Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee, and a huge crowd, kept following him wherever he went.

John tells us that they were motivated to follow, because they saw Jesus heal the sick. John also tells us that this occurs just about the time of the Passover, and so the crowds following Jesus may have been bolstered by pilgrims coming to celebrate in Jerusalem. This proximity to the Passover, which remembered God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, was also a time of heightened nationalism, and this may explain the crowds desire to take Jesus and make him king.

In the study called *The Fourfold Gospel*, authors McCarvey and Pendleton argue that the Passover would have occurred on April 16 in the year A.D. 29. The mention of the lush grass on which everyone sits, places this event in the spring time, probably late March or early April. Jesus went up a grass covered hill, probably to provide elevation in which his voice would carry as he taught the crowd.

Jesus turns to Phillip and asks, "Phillip, where can we buy bread to feed all these people?" John tells us in an aside that Jesus was testing Phillip, because he already knew what he was going to do. Phillip rightly replies, "It would take a small fortune (literally he says 200 denarii, with one denarii being a day's wage) to feed them." John is the only one who records the story this way. The other three gospel writers tell us that the disciples wanted Jesus to send the people away, because they were in a deserted place with no place to buy food.

In other words, even if Phillip had the 200 denarii, there was no where he could buy the food. In the other three accounts Jesus asks what food they do have, and the answer is the boy's lunch of five small barley loaves and two fish. In John's account, Andrew simply tells Jesus about the lunch. Jesus then tells his disciples to have everyone sit down on the grassy slope, and we are told there were about 5000 men, which means the number was much higher as children and women would also be in the crowd.

After giving thanks for the food, he broke it up (Yes, this is a fore shadow of the communion event) and it was distributed with twelve baskets of leftovers. Again, remember that the providing of food out of almost nothing was a "Wow" moment. Now the immediate question that comes to mind is this; why did Jesus feed the crowd? The answer is equally obvious. He fed them because he had compassion on them. Compassion for vulnerable people motivated Jesus to do everything he did, from miracles to breaking bread.

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Jesus had an especially deep abiding compassion on people who were stuck in a place with no obvious solution. Jairus and his daughter, a familiar story, comes to mind as an example. The literal meaning of the word used to identify sick people is the word “powerless”. I would describe them as vulnerable. Those who sat hungrily on that hillside were therefore vulnerable. Some may not have eaten for some time if they had been earnestly following Jesus.

The word compassion literally means, “His insides were stirred up”. In some West African languages, they use an expression such as “his stomach (or heart, or liver) was hot (or sad) because of them. The closest I could think of in English is that when Jesus saw the crowds who were hungry, his gut twisted, or it was gut wrenching to him. Ten thousand people, away from home, away from any village, and hungry, and it moved Jesus deeply.

I am sure you have seen things on television, or maybe even in your neighbourhoods that have twisted your insides. I should also point out that Jesus willingly went where his heart would be moved. John tells us that Jesus and his disciples crossed over the Sea of Galilee, and when they reached the shore the crowd was there waiting. As the boat approached the shore, Jesus had a choice. He knew what was waiting for him among that crowd. Hordes of desperate people, all at the end of their ropes, waiting to seek Jesus’ help.

Jesus could have said to his disciples, “Gee fellows, I’m just not up to this, lets sail on to find a quieter place to land. I know I might have been inclined to make that choice. Perhaps, the most compassionate thing Jesus did that day was to simply get out of the boat and wade into the crowd. Jesus faced the need, the desperation, and the emptiness. He refused to turn and walk away. Later on, he refused to send the people away despite the improbability of feeding them.

Yet, lack of food, and healing, was not the greatest need present on that grassy hillside. Jesus was motivated to compassion for something far more critical than mere physical needs. Time and time again the gospel writers tell us that when Jesus looked upon the crowd, he was moved to compassion, because they “were sheep without a shepherd”. In other words, the greatest void in their lives was a lack of leadership and guidance.

The crowds were for the most part to the political elite, a nuisance, and a necessary mechanism to earn tax revenue. To the Romans, and their Israelite partners, the crowds were no more useful than what they could provide to the ruling class. Whether the crowds suffered from lack of food, or poor health, mattered not one wit, as long as taxes kept flowing. Perhaps, although we find it distasteful, we can understand the political indifference to people.

However, in Mark 6:34 Jesus indicates that the one group who should have been shepherding God’s people, the people called and appointed to this task, had also failed miserably. Jesus tells us that the religious elite, the scribes and priests, looked down with contempt on the masses. They saw the needs of the populace and declared it was God’s judgment on them, instead of being motivated to extend mercy and guidance.

It gets worse for the people, because if God’s elected leadership in the temple did not care for the concerns of the people, then perhaps God didn’t care either. Remember the story in John nine of the man born blind. Everyone wanted to know whose sin caused his blindness.

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A culprit was sought by everyone to explain his blindness. Was it his parents, he himself in the womb; who caused God to punish him? No one, save Jesus, reacted to this man with any compassion. His plight did not move anyone.

Time and time again Jesus encountered people rejected by society, abused and exploited by others, blamed and judged and condemned, all in the name of religion. Jesus couldn't walk away, because God doesn't walk away no matter how messy our lives get. God doesn't ignore us, exploit us, or use tragedy to punish us. Instead, God comes and sits in the midst of us and asks us join him to break bread.

The crowds have been disappointed by those claiming to lead them or shepherd them. Now they discover in Jesus, one who is not just what they wanted, but more importantly, one who they need. Furthermore, it is critical for us to see in this story that God's storehouse is always full. Unlike Old Mother Hubbard, God's cupboard is never bare.

Even in the face of almost non-existent resources, God has plenty to spare. The boy's lunch, consisted of five barley loaves, which were like small cracker size buns, and two small salted fish, or sardines, would hardly be considered a banquet. How many times have we found ourselves at our wits end for lack of resources? Not enough money, not enough time, maybe even not enough food.

When faced with what appears like an impossible situation, we most likely are inclined to react as Phillip did. Phillip was like a walking human calculator wasn't he. Phillip somehow made a rough calculation of the crowd, the amount of food adequate to feed the crowd, and then how much money it would take to acquire that much food. Phillip was being logical and practical. He is usually the kind of person you want on your Stewards or Management boards.

Good with numbers. Good at estimating costs. We might even applaud Phillip for his due diligence. For those of us, like me, who struggle with complex financial issues, guys like Phillip are a godsend. Well, maybe not, at least in this story. Phillip may have been great with numbers but he was poor in faith. Remember what John says motivated the crowd to follow Jesus? They came in droves because of the healing miracles Jesus performed.

Phillip saw all of this, including turning water into wine. Phillip being a good Jewish fellow would also have been very familiar with the Old Testament stories of God providing food for his people, especially the manna in the wilderness. Remember this is an event that occurs close to Passover. After all of this, Phillip had his focus not on Jesus, but rather on his calculator. What mattered to Phillip was what cash he had, not that Jesus was present.

Now I know at least one reaction that will occur every time this miracle of Jesus is talked about. We take great comfort in the story, love to tell it to children in Sunday school, but when faced with our own inadequate resources as individuals, or as a church, and when we are commended to have faith, someone will inevitably say, "Well, let's be practical." Frankly, God's people should be anything but practical.

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One shudders to think what would have happened if the early church had strived not to be faithful but to be practical. How would the gospel have spread to the four corners of the earth if missionaries had chosen to be practical over being faithful? If Jesus had been practical, I wonder if he would have gone to the cross. The Apostle Paul wrote, “This ‘foolish’ plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God’s weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength.”

Practicality has its uses, but it is often a hindrance to the work of the Kingdom. If we saw every issue in this world from a practical view point and not from a compassionate view point we would all be in serious trouble. Perhaps you have heard the little story about a man walking along the sea shore after the tide had rolled out. He noticed that thousands of starfish were stranded on the beach after the receding tide.

The starfish were doomed as the hot sun would dry them out before the tide returned. A little further down the beach the man encountered a young boy who was picking up the stranded star fish and flinging them into the deeper water.

The man stopped and observed the boy and just as he was about to fling another starfish into the surf the man posed a question. “Why are you taking the time to toss a few starfish back into the sea? Look at the thousands of stranded starfish. What difference does it make if you throw that starfish back into the sea?” Without missing a beat, the young boy replied, “It makes all the difference in the world to this one.”

Can we stop for a while worrying about being practical, and try being a little more faithful? Can we put down our calculators, and pick up our crosses and follow Jesus? To borrow a bit from of all things the analogy of gambling, Jesus wants us to stop hedging our bets. and wants us to go all in. He wants us to hold nothing back, even if it seems like most impractical thing to do.

BENEDICTION: O Lord, as we go forth to meditate on the story of the loaves and fishes, let us not dwell on how much Jesus was able to do with so little. Neither let us dwell on how little we do with so much. Dismiss us, instead, with the desire to put ourselves, as Jesus did, wholly at your bidding. Amen.