

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William L. (Roy) Hills on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 31, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

...you give them something to eat

Several things have inspired my sermon this week: a picture of a starving child in Somalia which I can't seem to get out of my head, the article by Katharine Jefferts Schori in our bulletin, and the lessons for today all of which started me thinking about our church and the Eucharist. My mind has been racing, so many connections to make, so many stories to tell. I had a hard time deciding what to say...lots of connections with our church, mission work in the world, and images, metaphors, and understandings of our Eucharist.

In the story of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus says to his disciples, "...you give them something to eat." This is a lesson and a charge to his disciples and to all of us about ministry. God enlists us to be co-creators and collaborators with God. God sent his son into the world—Jesus became incarnate, was made man—so he could be among us and be with us. We Episcopalians hold that we have a sacramental and incarnational faith. We love our sacraments, but we live in the world.

Urban Holmes, the former dean of Sewanee seminary was fond of saying, "We Christians live in two worlds, we have one foot in the kingdom of God and the other foot in the world." I wondered about that for at least two reasons: for one thing, I once had one foot on one boat and one foot on another and the boats separated and I nearly drowned...and for another, while I think I am a very spiritual person, a lot of people might say I am very worldly. On the other hand, perhaps you have heard it said of some ministers, "He was so spiritually minded that he was no earthly good."

I think we Episcopalians live in the world, not to shun the world, but that we might try to make it a better place by living in it. We deal with good and evil. We are not afraid of dirtying our hands in the world. We claim "the priesthood of all believers". All of that means that God is counting on us to be God's helpers. The idea that God needs our help is perhaps not a popular one. Many people are content to let God do it all, "God can do what God wants to do without my help...so let God do it." "God can do whatever he wants, so I hope he wants to help those people, dang if I'm going to." Or you have heard it said, "God helps those who help themselves."

We say that we are saved by grace through faith. We say that it is enough to confess that Jesus is the Christ; one doesn't have to do anything else. But, we must wonder what Jesus meant when he said, "Feed my sheep" and "You give them something to eat." In other words, grace and faith ought to eventually, in some way manifest themselves in Christian action—ministry—doing something for the Lord.

In Genesis, we have been created in the image of God and we have been given dominion over all the earth. We are charged to tend the garden and to till the soil, to take care of the earth and its peoples. Jesus clearly said, "Feed my sheep." We, therefore, are partners with God to do his work in the world. We are co-creators with God in creation. We are partners in healing when we do the work of healing and we are co-distributors of the goodness of God when we assist in food distribution. The human with the divine—is the way of incarnation. Perhaps St. Augustine was right when he said, "Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not."

On that hillside some 2000 years ago, Jesus was offering saving information for the living and for the dying. He was teaching spiritual truths. The people were captivated by his teaching. Nevertheless, there came a time when the hunger for "soul food" and spiritual truths gave way to a hunger for real food. The people, like us, cannot escape their humanity any more than they can escape their death. While not living by bread alone, they, and we, don't get far without it. And so, we are caught up in this story for at least two reasons: on the one hand, the story clearly shows that Jesus is capable of the miracle of feeding people—feeding them spiritually and feeding them physically. And on the other hand, we are confronted with the way that the people were fed. Jesus broke the bread and the fishes, gave thanks, and then **gave it to the disciples to distribute it** to the masses. Sometimes we forget the importance of food.

It is not a commonly held idea; that "the people encounter the divinity of Jesus Christ through their stomachs. Not through their hearts, or through warm feelings, or through their 'spirits' or their 'souls, but through their bellies." And yet, our Eucharistic feast is essentially dining at table with friends.

Christian food distribution centers should not concern themselves with conversion first, but with the provision of food for the hungry. It sometimes doesn't occur to people that food and water can be in themselves instruments of religion and spirituality. There's no stained glass, no pews, no bulletins, no procession, no inspiring music, no doctrines to be espoused or elaborated on...Just food? How can that be religious? Yet, an Episcopal monk once told me, "It is only for your love that the poor can forgive you for the food which you give them." In the feeding of the five thousand, there are simply battalions of people sitting on a hillside, eating bread, picking bones out of fish, in tightly crowded groups, rejoicing in the provision of food and sharing the goodness of God.

Mahatma Gandhi said: "For the millions who go without two meals a day, the only form in which God dare appear is food."

It is not a natural thing for us to do, share with others, give up some of what we have to benefit someone else, give of ourselves. Frankly, I think it scares us. For in the back of our minds is a fear that giving away anything leads to giving away everything, leaving us destitute. And it is often someone else's responsibility. Yet, Jesus said to his disciples, "...you give them something to eat" and then he showed us that in giving, we would not

be left empty. And in our Eucharist, Jesus assures us that he is here for us—spiritually and physically—and we can leave here refreshed to serve others—spiritually and physically—when we sit down at table with our family and those we love and in our relationships, we might think of it as communion, “This is my body given for you...this is my blood given for you.”

I’m going to sing a few verses of that old song Kumbaya, which means “come by here.” It’s sad that Kumbaya has come to mean “anything goes” for some people and for some it is a “liberal” mantra; but, that is not what it means at all. “Come by here” means I want to be involved in your life. “Come by here” means I am willing to share myself with you. So, I want you to sing with me a few verses saying “come by here” and let’s interject some worldly needs remembering to include those closest to us, the one’s we love, our families as we sing. Let’s begin with...starving. [Follow with hurting...lonely ...dying.] See, it’s possible that the divine and the incarnate meet together whenever we are responsive to the real needs of humanity.

Jesus said to his disciples “...you give them something to eat.”