

Pent8_Prop13A_080314_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

...give us the bread that satisfies, the food without price, that our lives may be freed to share your overflowing love; through Jesus Christ, the breaker of bread.

In the Name of God, Creator, Liberator and Sustainer. Amen.

*Is it worth the waiting for?
If we live 'til eighty four
All we ever get is gru...el!
Ev'ry day we say our prayer --
Will they change the bill of fare?
Still we get the same old gru...el!
There's not a crust, not a crumb can we find,
Can we beg, can we borrow, or cadge,
But there's nothing to stop us from getting a thrill
When we all close our eyes and imag...ine
Food, glorious food!*

This song, sung by the orphans in the musical, "Oliver!" could have been sung by the majority of people who came to see to Jesus as he traveled from town to town, teaching the crowds and healing many who were ill.

Food is important. Healthy food nourishes our bodies and our minds. Without healthy food, we get sick. Without any food, we die. Back in the first-century world of the Roman Empire, life was scored by significant inequalities concerning access to food. Many people were well-acquainted with food insecurity, and they struggled on a daily basis for adequate food and nutrition.

The empire was very hierarchical in its social structure, and there was a small group of ruling elite. They used their power to control resources, so they enjoyed an abundance of good quality and various foods, but most of the people - the ones who came to hear and see Jesus - lived near, at, or below subsistence level. They suffered from lack of food and low food quality. Inadequate nutrition and inadequate immunity resulted in diseases of deprivation and contagion, and this was one of the main reasons why so many

people who came to see Jesus were sick. "Give us this day our daily bread" reflects this situation.

It is clear, however, through Jesus' example, that it is God's will that hungry people be fed. Throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, feeding others has a most important role - God provides food for the people of Israel who are wandering in the wilderness; Isaiah speaks of an age when God will "make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines," - a life of abundance; and Jesus not only feeds thousands of people in today's Gospel lesson, it is found in all four Gospels and twice in Matthew and Mark. No other story is repeated so many times - indeed, not being hungry is very important to God!

So, at the beginning of our lesson, we learn that Jesus had withdrawn to a deserted place by himself. The reason for his desire to 'get away' is in the first 12 verses of this chapter: Jesus had just learned that his first cousin, his friend, John the Baptist, had been murdered by King Herod at a feast. He was devastated, and he needed some time away to regroup.

But people followed him, and they told their friends where he was, and their friends told others, and pretty soon there was a huge crowd, waiting to see what Jesus would do for them. The stark contrast of the story of John's death against the scene where the poor, sick and hungry people show up looking for help is like changing the TV channel from an episode of "Real Housewives of Beverly Hills" to an infomercial about starving children dying around the world. Matthew uses these contrasts to show just what sort of God Jesus represents.

In the first century gods (with a little 'g') didn't care about the people who made up the crowds following Jesus. They - the gods - were detached, removed from the personal lives of the humans below. They either cared nothing for the average person, or they toyed with them, using them as playthings. At their best, gods were supposed to take the side of the rich and powerful, sanctioning their exploitation of the poor, and even the bloody murder of a prophet like John. They definitely did NOT side with the ordinary, the oppressed or the hungry.

But Jesus was different; he had compassion on the people. And with this compassion Jesus personified and carried out the steady call of the God of

Israel to feed the hungry. And feeding them all was a BIG deal! There was nowhere to go get some food, as the disciples suggested. They couldn't walk back to the local Subway and order up some trays of sandwiches for everyone. There were no places available to find 'extra' food. Nobody had enough to eat, much less to give away.

So Jesus said to the disciples, "You feed them." When they returned from their survey of the crowd, they reported, "We have nothing here but five loaves and fishes." And Matthew tells us what happens when you move from a worldview of scarcity to one of abundance: Jesus - in words and actions that foreshadow the Last Supper (and our Eucharist) - "Thank you, God, for these loaves and fishes," - Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives the food to the disciples, who distribute it to everyone there, and "all ate and were filled."

They didn't just all eat. They all ate and were satisfied. This is the gracious, overflowing, extravagant abundance of God.

What is our worldview in this day and age?

We are the richest country in the world, but we seem to act out of a theology of scarcity. Some of our politicians and news organizations go to great lengths to tell us we don't have enough. So-called religious figures make a very good living telling us, not how to take care of the poor and the hungry, but how to take advantage of the prosperity that is available to us if we only take care of ourselves. And now it seems we have religious politicians in this state, telling us that God gave coal to Alabama specifically for us to use! We hoard goods (while we waste them), afraid that a disaster will come and we won't have all that we need.

We talk about how we don't have enough to go around. We say we can't afford to give hungry people food stamps, or WIC, or School Lunch programs. We apparently are afraid of poor, scared children who are crossing our southern border, seeking food and shelter and safety from the murderous gangs in their home countries - so afraid that we scream obscenities at them, telling them to turn around and go home.

What happened to the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger, to care for the widowed and orphaned, and to provide hospitality to those in our midst? Can we open our churches, our synagogues and temples, our mosques and make a place for

all at the table? Can we see possibilities instead of dead ends? Can we not only pray for peace in our warring world but also work for it as well, either by simple steps or radical actions?

Yes, of course we can! With God all things are possible.

We have all heard the phrase, 'the more you give, the more you get.' Well, here's another take on it: theologian Frederick Buechner wrote, "Greed is the mathematical truism that the more you get, the more you have. The opposite of greed - the selfless love of God of neighbor - is based on the truth that the more you give away in love, the more you are."

There is an old, old story about a man who died and was given a tour of both heaven and hell so he could select his final destination. First, the angel took the man down to hell. There was a huge banquet table with many people seated around it. Men, women, boys and girls, young and old were there. Each one of them held a very long fork. It was a strange, huge fork, much bigger than the man had ever seen. On the table was a feast of great food. But there was no talking, laughing or hugging. They had looks of anger, suspicion and fear on their faces. The people looked stick-thin, obviously starving.

Then the angel took the man up to heaven. There was another long table with lots of people sitting around it and a great feast on it. There was lots of talking, laughing and hugging. They looked like one big family. These people looked well-fed, very happy and satisfied, like they were having a good time.

The man asked the angel, "Why do the people in hell look so hungry? Why do they look so lonely and unhappy? They have everything the people in heaven have. Why are they so miserable?"

The angel answered, "In hell, there is no love and trust. The spirit of giving and sharing is not there; the people are selfish and only think of themselves. When the people use the forks to pick up the food, they are unable to reach their mouths to put the food in because the handles are so long. So they go hungry and are very unhappy."

"In heaven, the people love each other. They may have differences and they may make mistakes, but they learn to forgive. They may have selfish instincts, but they learn to share. They give without taking first. In heaven, the forks are too long to

feed themselves, too, but they feed each other. That is why they don't go hungry. And this spirit of giving and sharing breeds even more love, that's why everyone is so happy and satisfied with life, not just physically, but emotionally, too."

It's true that we can't feed everyone. It's true that there will always be suffering. We can't make it go away. We can't end it for everyone, everywhere, once and for all. Jesus did not feed all of the people in the whole world. But that is no reason to do nothing and let those whom we CAN save die. Perhaps the miracle in today's story was not that Jesus changed the five loaves into enough to feed thousands, but that he changed the hearts of the people there to enable them to feed each other.

May our hearts be changed as well.