

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 7th, 2021
Vestry Charge, 2021
Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21C; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

you give them something to eat
Matthew 14:16, Mark 6:37

love one another as I have loved you
John 13:34

seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile ...
for in its welfare you will find your welfare
Jeremiah 29:7

worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness
Psalm 96:9

I'm going to take the opportunity to speak today on a different text than the one appointed for today in the lectionary. It's one that's come to mind for me regularly throughout this year, mostly because of one brief sentence, a command really, from Jesus: "You give them something to eat."

It comes from the story of the feeding of the five thousand in both Matthew and Mark. In short—Jesus has just spent a good portion of the day either teaching or healing a great crowd; at the end of the day the disciples see that the people are hungry, and bring this to Jesus; and Jesus responds: "you give them something to eat." And by this, Jesus invites the disciples into God's own ministry.

So what I will do today is to probe this saying of Jesus's in three parts: 1. you; 2. give them; and 3. something to eat.

1. "You ... " Or, "Love one another as I have loved you."

So when Jesus says, "you give them something to eat," who is the "you"? Well it's not the crowds; it's the disciples. Because there is something distinct about the disciples. They are the ones who have decided to follow Jesus; for better or worse they have thrown in with this strange man. And they are the ones to whom Jesus speaks most directly.

It's to the disciples, not the crowds, to whom Jesus will speak in John's Gospel when he says "love one another as I have loved you."

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And it is this community of disciples, the people to whom Jesus speaks when he says, “love one another as I have loved you,” that I have in mind when I speak in my vestry report about families, children, and young adults; it’s what I have in mind when I speak about “Imagining the Ecosystem,” where I speak about communities within the community, whether that be communities of service like Parish Visitors, or communities of learning like the various Bible studies we have, or prayer- or worship-oriented communities within the larger community at St. John’s.

But these aren’t communities for their own sake—they are the primary places where we learn to love one another as Jesus loves us. Where we enjoy one another; where we grow together; where sometimes we endure one another in loving and sanctifying patience; and where we are open to others.

So when Jesus says “**you** give them something to eat” he is speaking to a community of people who are invited into his love: communities, and communities-within-community, in which we learn to love one another as he loves us.

2. “... give them ...” Or, “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

What I find most interesting about Jesus inviting the disciples into his work—“you give them something to eat”—is that the disciples *aren’t actually necessary to what happens next*. Think of the story of hungry Israel wandering in the wilderness. In that story, food just fell from the sky. The Israelites just went round and gathered it up.

So the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand could have proceeded Oprah-style, with nothing at all asked of the disciples. Jesus could have said to the crowd, “look under your blanket and into your bags! You get loaves and fishes, and you get loaves and fishes, and you get loaves and fishes!”

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The miracle itself didn't necessarily have any need of the disciples at all. But that wasn't Jesus's way. So why does Jesus invite his disciples into the work of feeding the five thousand? It's for both the sake of the hungry, and for the sake of the disciples.

Similarly, when Israel is in exile in Babylon, the Lord tells Israel to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile." This is obviously about serving the real needs of the city. But that's not all. What the Lord tells Israel in exile is to "seek the welfare of the city ... for *in its welfare you will find your welfare.*"

So service to those who may not find themselves within the circle of disciples—"give *them*"—is not simply for the sake of the "them". The service of the disciples is also *for the sake of the disciples*. In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus *choosing* not to solve the problem of the hunger of the crowds on his own, but asking the disciples into his own work, is a work of grace *for the disciples*.

I suppose we could speak of this in terms of spiritual growth—the sort of growth that comes with developing relationships with our neighbours. And so any talk about making connections between St. John's and the other communities around us is not simply for others—it's for our own growth in discipleship, our own growth as followers of Jesus.

In fact I'd go a bit further. It's not clear to me that we do grow as followers of Jesus if we don't connect to the other communities around us. And it seems to me that Jesus makes that clear when he doesn't do everything on his own without the disciples, nor does Jesus only feed his inner circle.

So yes, let us love one another. But let us also grow in connection with the greater community. Let us also do what Jesus invites us to do: to put our own bread and our own fishes, face-to-face, into the hands of a hungry crowd.

3. " ... something to eat." Or, "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."

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Let us be clear: when the disciples were told, “you give them something to eat,” it did indeed entail giving the crowds *something to actually eat*. And so the disciples of Jesus will offer real material aid to others.

But there is also more to it than this.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that Dorothy Day found herself in disagreement with Cesar Chavez, the advocate for migrant labourers in California, at a time when considerable amounts of money were being spent on a new cathedral for the Archdiocese of San Francisco in 1962. “We don’t ask for more cathedrals,” said Chavez, “we don’t ask for bigger churches or fine gifts. We ask for the church’s presence among us. We ask for the church to sacrifice with the people for social change, for justice, and for love of brother.”

Dorothy Day, herself with as much credibility as Chavez for her work with the poor and working poor, replied to this criticisms by saying that Chavez was entirely correct but for one thing: it wasn’t an either/or proposition. “The church has an obligation to feed the poor, and we cannot spend all our money on buildings,” she said, in agreement with Chavez and so many other anti-poverty advocates.

But Day also would not set that against the church’s commitment to the arts and to the new cathedral. So in response to critics like Chavez, she would also say: “there are many kinds of hunger. There is a hunger for bread, and we must give people food. But there is also a hunger for beauty.”

With Day, I would suggest that we shouldn’t see a strong distinction between the hungers of the world. There is, I would say, a hierarchy of things; and that we do indeed have an obligation to offer what we have for the sake of the material well-being of others. And that to simply “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,” without offering material aid to those in need, is to misunderstand and misconstrue the gospel.

But also, I’m with her rather than Chavez when it comes to the hungers of the world. There is a hunger for beauty, and we should have no misgivings about a vocation to feed others in this way as well—so long as this is a

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beauty that we would share not only amongst ourselves, but with a hungry world.

You give them something to eat.

That *you* is *us*. The followers of Jesus, the ones he commands: “love one another as I have loved you.” We are asked to love one another in gentleness, in patience, in perseverance, and in self-offering. So let us continue to visit and call those who can’t make it here; to build one another up in ministry; to study together, to grow together, to serve together, to pray together.

You **give them** something to eat.

There is a hungry world out there as well, and we are asked to give of ourselves not simply for one another, but also for the sake of the stranger and the neighbour. This work for others, though, is not simply for the benefit of the crowd. “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,” writes Jeremiah, “for in its welfare *you will find your welfare.*”

You give them **something to eat**.

Yes, let us grow in ministries in which others are indeed fed, and real physical needs are met. But may we be mindful that there are many hungers in the world, and that the hunger for beauty is real; may we be granted the vision that sees the *connections* between holiness, beauty, and worship.

And in heeding this command—“you give them something to eat”—may we be mindful that it all takes place in the grace, and by the grace, of God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, AMEN.

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