

“Food for Thought”

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 17
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, PhD

Sunday, July 26, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145:10-18;
Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

May the words that I speak, and the things that we think about be acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

My favorite fast food is fish and chips. Not just any old fish and chips, but fish and chips from Long John Silvers. Long John Silvers’ fish and chips come in a medium size box large enough to hold two pieces of fish, two cornbread hush puppies, and a serving of french fries. So, when I read this morning’s gospel, that boy’s lunch was a basked with fish and bread, my mind immediately recalled my favorite fast food . . . fish and chips.

And after drooling some, that got me to thinking: What would five thousand boxes of fish and chips look like? How long would it take Long John Silvers, not only to prepare them, but to find servers to serve them? Even more perplexing, the question: How long would it take for five loaves and two fish to be broken over and over and over again until five thousand had enough to eat and twelve baskets of edible scraps were left over?

But surely this is the wrong approach.

Let’s go back to the story. Jesus attempts to find a quiet place where He can instruct the disciples. The crowd follows Him, however, and they have other ideas. There follows a phenomenon with which we’re very familiar: the gathering of large crowds of people intent on being able to see for themselves some public figure. A rock star appears in Harrisburg, and the fans are out in force. The President pays a visit to Carlisle, and the people line the streets and stand for hours just to get a glimpse of the man. But the greatest crowds are drawn, aren’t they, as we’ve seen, by candidates running for the office of President of the United States.

The crowd in Jesus’ time flocked to him because of the signs He did for the sick. We want to call them “miracles,” but John is particular in his use of the word “signs.” For to John, after Jesus death and resurrection, the age of signs is closed. What’s he talking about? Simply, he wants the readers to understand that the healings and other mighty deeds that Jesus performed were, in actual fact, signs of His divine identity and authority.

It might seem as though Jesus had put aside His teaching as He prepares to deal with the crowd. But He was about to use what was happening as the lesson, not only for His disciples then, but for all who have followed Him, right down to us, here, today. He asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Skipping over the fact that there is nowhere to buy such provisions (there are no supermarkets in the area), Philip goes for the fiscal jugular; he points out that such a purchase is of such great cost that their budget cannot possibly meet it; even six months wages would not be enough to do the trick.

Then Andrew makes a peculiar observation – there’s a kid here with his lunch basket; he’s got five dinner rolls and two lunch size fish. And that was all the food that was to be had. No way would that feed a crowd of five thousand! And yet it does. And if that’s not all, when the disciples head in their boat back to Capernaum, darkness fell, the wind picked up and, despite their strongest rowing, they only managed to cover a couple of miles, nowhere near getting home.

Just when it seems as though they were in deadly trouble, Jesus turns up, walking on the water. That’s the last straw for the weary, storm beleaguered fishermen. They are ready (as we would say) to freak. Jesus calms them, and the storm, and lo and behold, there they are at Capernaum. And that, as Paul Harvey would have said, is the rest of the story.

Many faithful Christians are quite happy to leave it there – two wonderful miracles performed by our Lord. But just wait a second. Didn’t John tell us that Jesus was trying to teach His disciples something? And that, beloved, is the heart of the Gospel as we heard it again this morning. It’s a great lesson! Let’s go back to the Gospel and look at it much more closely.

You see, the writer of the Gospel used words and events on two levels. Take the word “darkness.” John uses it not only to tell us the time of day, but also as a vivid symbol of the real circumstances of the people in that darkness. Further, the event John recounts not only described important events in the lives of Jesus and His disciples, but also on a deeper level, they reveal what God is up to in them.

The first clue John gives us comes with the mention of the Passover. (Did you know there is no Last Supper in the Gospel of John?) You know what Passover is; it’s the Jewish celebration of God’s rescue of His people from the clutches of Pharaoh. It was the beginning of the great exodus during which the people received the Ten Commandments and their identity as the chosen people of God, and it culminated in their arrival at the Promised Land. What follows in this morning’s Gospel then, is Jesus’ instruction about God’s grace and the disciples – and our – salvation. It’s a beautiful account of God’s unconditional love and His free and gracious gift of salvation to all. An account of a new exodus, if you will, that culminates in a priceless gift, and the cost will be borne by Christ on the cross.

“Where are we to buy bread?” Jesus asks. And Philip’s answer is immediate: We can’t possibly afford it. Remember the question is a test. Jesus already knew what He would do: provide sustenance and life for the crowd; and not because they deserved it, but because He, like His Father, was about to give it to them as a free gift. You see the point Jesus is making? The point Jesus is making is this: the costly, impossible, expensive gift, is given freely, and cautious calculations only based on possibility don’t work; they’re only revered in our world which in doing so, chooses to ignore the One who redefines what is possible. Ah, beloved, how many times do we find ourselves caught in such calculations? We can’t afford it. We haven’t got what it takes. We don’t know how to do it – before we act as faithful followers of our Lord?

It will be the boy’s lunch basket – the five dinner rolls and two lunch size fish – which will prove to be more than enough to feed the crowd, as impossible as that is. In fact, there will be twelve

baskets left over – enough, you see, for each of the tribes of Israel, and presumably more than that. You’ve got it right. It’s a free lunch.

Next comes John’s pointed account of the crowd’s response. The crowd has followed Him because He has performed great signs. We already know that Jesus is suspicious of those who flock to Him simply *because* of His ability to perform such signs. And we are aware from the numerous accounts in the New Testament of the threefold response people have to such mighty acts: there are those who get it, and believe; there are those disregard them completely as mere magical tricks; and there are those see them as clear proof that Jesus is in league with Satan and His powers are evil.

This crowd, however, is hooked on the signs Jesus has done for the sick. On the one hand, the crowd declares that He is the promised prophet, but on the other hand (having been miraculously fed), they want Him to be king. The mind of the crowd is simply utilitarian: What can we get out of this miracle worker? A perpetual free lunch? Does it sound familiar? You know the old cry – what’s in it for me? It’s the kind of thinking that skews the reality of grace and seeks to make Jesus a genie, or an errand boy, to satisfy our human wants. It’s so easy, isn’t it beloved, to slip into using our faith and our prayers simply to satisfy what *we* want.

Just when the heart of Jesus’ teaching becomes obvious and uncomfortable for us, John moves to the aftermath of the feeding of the five thousand. The meal is over; the disciples head for home. In the midst of heavy wind and rough seas, when their journey appears to be failing and impossible, Jesus appears. It’s not just that He walks on the water to them that gets their (and our) attention, but it’s what He says. Did you notice it? “It is I; do not be afraid.”

“It is I.” Ego eimi, in Greek. I AM! Remember when Moses asked God for His name, that the people might know who He was? God responded, “I AM!” Jesus said “It is I; do not be afraid.” The boat immediately reaches Capernaum, their destination; the terrified disciples are calmed and rescued. So Jesus is disclosed as the physical and human revelation of God Himself, He who makes the difference between darkness and light, terror and peace, death and life. Which is what is offered to us again this morning. So come and be fed. Eat the bread, drink the wine, receive your forgiveness, be made righteous once again, and receive the assurance of your salvation.

A tiny, tiny, insignificant meal, not at all unlike the Galilean boy’s lunch. A morsel of bread, a dip of wine – but what a feast, what a meal! And the cost? The invitation to us to live lives of thankfulness and to take Christ into the world, living compassion and forgiveness, and really trying to be His disciples.

As for me? Well, from now on fish and chips from Long John Silvers will certainly be food for thought.

Amen.

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