The Courage to Share

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost, July 31, 2005

Nehemiah 9:16-20 Psalm 78:1-29 Romans 8:35-39 Matthew 14:13-21

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 9: 38-39)

The disciples were afraid. Gathered all around them in the darkening twilight was a hungry crowd – 5000 men, as well as women and children. (A counting system that betrays Matthew's own cultural bias.)

Gathered around them was an anxious crowd – in Matthew's gospel, this mass meeting takes place just after John the Baptist has been beheaded by Herod. The crowd has followed Jesus to the other side of the Sea of Galilee out of Herod's kingdom, into the kingdom controlled by Phillip, Herod's more merciful brother. This is not some open-air outdoor education course. This is a crowd considering political rebellion.

Gathered around them was a poor crowd – hungry and anxious; many of these people were willing to follow Jesus because they had no homes or farms or businesses, no money or support in their own towns.

Gathered around them was an unclean crowd – Jesus had been healing all day, surrounded by lepers, the infirm, the unclean: women who bled, infants who wailed, old men whose bodies were broken.

Gathered around them was a strange crowd – unfamiliar to the disciples, unfamiliar to the surrounding towns to the places where the disciples wanted to send them.

The disciples know that what is needed at a time like this is some good old-fashioned common sense:

"Hey, teacher, step away from that old blind woman for a moment. Look around you. The sun is setting. We're in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by strangers in a strange land. The people are hungry, angry, anxious, agitated. Send them away. Let someone else take care of their problems. Send them away."

And Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

The process of feeding the crowd, Jesus showed them, is simple:

1. Listen to the need of those around you
2. Take an inventory – God has already given you what you need
3. Turn to God in prayer and hope.
4. Move from prayer to action
5. Clean up when you are finished.

"They need not go away; you give them something to eat." It is a simple process that Messiah has undertaken again and again.

It is 1871, and a group of friends and neighbors in West Newton decide to share their faith and their community of prayer with the growing crowds of West Newton and Auburndale. Putting up an announcement about their intent to start an Episcopal church, they begin 134 years of reaching out to the physically and spiritually hungry. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

It is 1919, and the nation is recovering from a bloody war across three continents. Young people are facing a disenchanted world, very different from the world their parents had grown up in. Parish of the Messiah steps forward, helping to found a national program of youth leadership, the Young People's Fellowship. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

It is 1943; the country is again at war when the buildings of our church go up in flames. But the crowds are still gathered, people are

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still giving thanks, and in a time of darkness and war, Messiah is determined to remain a community of prayer and hope. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Here on the altar are the parish registers for the last 134 years. Here on the altar are a vast multitude which has been feed from this place. A great inventory, a vast multitude to which we can add: the women and men who are here every day for AA meetings; the families sheltered and fed by our outreach ministries over the years; The families at Brookline Infant Toddler Center; the musicians and audiences fed with beauty and art; the visitors who have passed through this place; the people we pray for on our parish prayer list. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

And here is another book to place on the altar. The Newton yellow pages -- the vast multitude all around us. A crowd of 84,000 people, full of many kinds of hunger – people seeking solace, healing, and community; food, shelter, and safety, people seeking hope. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

When I looked over my sermon on Saturday night, I thought to myself: “Yikes! This is scary stuff – this is “outside the door” stuff. In three weeks the sermons have moved from the altar to the garden right out to the neighborhood.”

The steps are simple, to be sure:

- Listen to the need of those around you
- Take an inventory – God has already given you what you need
- Turn to God in prayer and hope.
- Move from prayer to action.
- Clean up when you are finished.

But like the anxious disciples, I’m intimidated by these steps. Someone else can feed the hungry, care for the sick, shake hands with the stranger. And then Christ says, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Faith takes courage. And thank God, faith makes courage. We have time ahead of us to pray together, to listen to the cries of the world, in Newton and beyond; time to take inventory and respond to those cries; time to feed, and time to clean up.

Today, what I’m praying for, for myself, and for all of us, is courage. Today my prayer for Messiah is a prayer God has answered here every day for 134 years. A prayer that God whispered to Paul, and which he shared with that tiny church in Rome so many centuries ago:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This week’s image is a Eucharistic stamp from Greece – a wooden stamp used in marking loaves of bread for the Eucharist. It is a reminder of one of the wonderful ways Christ feeds us, responding in love to our spiritual hunger.

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