

SERVING THE TABLES



John 6:10 "Jesus said (to the apostles), 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, (the apostles) distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, (Jesus) told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So (his disciples) gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that (Jesus) had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' When Jesus realized that

they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself."

Three weeks ago, our Gospel reading was Jesus calling the twelve apostles and beginning to send them out two by two, and giving them authority over unclean spirits. He ordered them then, as you may remember, to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. Jesus (also) said to the twelve disciples, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place." In Luke's version of this story, Jesus says to the disciples: "Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide. . . Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you." The disciples here were dependent upon the goodness of others to care for them. And Jesus said to them, "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, (simply) shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." And so, the twelve apostles went out as sent, in these humble and modest circumstances to serve the people of God they encountered, casting out many demons, forgiving many of their sins, and anointing with oil many who were sick and healing them.

In last week's gospel, the apostles returned from their journeys and gathered around Jesus, excitedly telling him all that they had seen and done. For their mission had been a huge success and people were now following them wherever they went! So, Jesus said to the twelve in last week's Gospel, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For so many people were coming and going at that place, we are told, that the apostles did not have time to eat. And so, they all went away in the boat to find a deserted place for themselves.

Now in today's reading, once their boat had reached the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a large crowd began following Jesus because the crowd saw the signs that Jesus was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples on a hillside near the Sea of Galilee, and when he looked up and saw the size of the crowd coming to him, Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And seeing 5,000 people, Jesus realized that this would be something other than a quiet teaching moment on a hillside with his twelve apostles. Jesus knew the large crowd would need to be cared for, that they would need sustenance. So, Jesus asked his disciples where they might find enough bread for these people to eat. The twelve apostles were baffled and overwhelmed by this question. Philip told Jesus that "six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of (these

people) to get just a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Jesus, "There is a boy here who is willing to share what he has. But he only has five barley loaves and two fish. What are they among so many people?" In the end, the disciples simply didn't know what to do. Men who would later become bishops and leaders and saints and heroes of the early Church were confounded.

So, Jesus told them what to do. Jesus told his twelve apostles to wait upon the crowd, to have the people sit down on the grass, to gather what food they had and to distribute it among the people. And afterwards Jesus assigned the twelve the task of picking up and collecting the leftovers. The future leaders of the Church were directed by Jesus to have the crowd sit down, to serve them, and to clean up afterwards; that is, Jesus directed his disciples to be hostesses, waiters, and busboys. They were there to serve the people, to attend to their basic human needs as best they could, just as they had done on their earlier mission trips in modest and humble ways. Meanwhile when the crowd saw the sign that Jesus had done, they were amazed, and sought to crown Jesus king, but Jesus did not want to rule over the people like that, he didn't want to be their king, he wanted to serve them, to comfort them, to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to forgive the sinner, to share the Good News of God's love with them, and then to go on his way to

the next town. He set an example for his followers: to serve, not to be served; an example that was soon forgotten.

For a few years later, when Jesus was gone, and the Twelve Apostles were in charge, when they were the leaders of the new Church, they seem to me to have lost touch with the mission Jesus was calling them to follow in today's reading. As time went on and the Apostles set about launching this new community of faith, they seemed to become less and less inclined to look up and see the actual needs of the people coming forward, as Jesus had done on that hillside by the Sea of Galilee. For example, in the Book of Acts, chapter six, we are told that during those early days of the Church, when the number of followers were increasing dramatically, the Greek-speaking Jews following the Way of Jesus in Jerusalem, complained against the Hebrew-speaking Jews, because the Greek-speaking Jews thought that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food to the needy. So, what did the twelve Apostles do? How did they address this concern? Did the Apostles become again the hostesses, waiters, and busboys that they once were in the past, in today's reading? No; they called together the whole community of the followers of Jesus, and you won't believe what they said to them. The apostles said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good

standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." And so was created the order of Deacons to serve the tables, because the Twelve Apostles did not want to. They did not want to be hostesses or waiters or busboys as they had been years before on the hillside with Jesus. They wanted to teach and tell their stories, they wanted to preach. Like some many clergy in succeeding centuries, they didn't want to serve, so much as to be served, to hold positions of respect and authority in the community. The apostles in Acts had decided what they wanted to do, and that's what they did. When impoverished widows came to them hungry, they fobbed the duty of caring for them off onto Stephen and the other newly created deacons, rather than get their own hands dirty, rather than serve the needs of the people as Jesus had directed them in today's Gospel.

Sadly, over the years, church leaders have often become best known for their pontificating, for their preaching, for their telling others what to believe and how to live their lives, rather than for serving others in modest and humble ways, rather than for healing the sick and feeding the hungry and comforting the broken hearted. Sadly, over the years, church leaders have often become better known for their beautiful lace and brocade vestments, and the grand cathedrals they built and

over which they ruled, rather than for serving the hungry and downtrodden, the widows and the orphans.

Such that it became a miraculous act of sainthood and holiness not so long ago, when a little nun actually went out into the streets of Calcutta and began ministering to the poor and the dying --- having had enough of her life of grandeur behind the high protective walls surrounding their fine Victorian mansions where her fellow nuns taught the daughters of the rich, while she felt called instead to a life of service, to the poorest of the poor. In the same way, I think of St. Francis of Assisi, or St. Elizabeth of Hungary, or Oscar Romero, or Constance and her companions, the so-called Martyrs of Memphis, or Charles Lowder of East London. People who were moved to follow Jesus' command to serve, rather than being served.

We have too often lost in the Church that sense of caring for others, tending to the needs of the poor and the marginalized, caring for the immigrants and the refugees, that sense of religious duty of social service, of working for the greater good of our community rather than feathering our own nests, of sacrificing what we have for the sake of others, of sharing the bounty we have received from God, so that all could be feed and be satisfied.

We all need to struggle more to be like those disciples on the hillside with Jesus, feeding the hungry, caring for the

poor, bringing healing to the sick, more like them than like those later Apostles and their successors, those pontificating prelates and prancing preachers. We Christians mustn't been known only for our misbehaving clergy or the whining of religious partisans. We must be doing something relevant for this sinful and broken world of ours, where people are hungry and thirsty and naked and in prison. We must be known more by our actions, not our beliefs, actions of simple goodness and mercy, on behalf of the poor and the meek, and the least of these our brethren, as we all strive together to turn our faith into service, leveraging hope and changing lives. We need to see and respond to the needs of our own neighbors.

And so, we do. And we do many of things we do in concert here with others, with other religious people in this town, as part of the Washington Council of Congregations. We are not a silo church, serving only ourselves. We at St. John's, for example, joined with others to host the Food Drive yesterday at The Congregational Church on the Green. We at St. John's join with our friends manning the weekly table at the Farmer's Market to gather fruits and vegetables for the poor, and supporting the Community Culinary School in New Milford. We with others organize and support the quarterly American Red Cross Blood Drives here at St. John's. We make weekly runs to the local Food Banks to deliver meals prepared by the chefs at commercial

kitchen of Trinity Retreat Center in West Cornwall. Volunteers from St. John's help each month at the Warren Food Bank. We are beginning now to work together to settle a refugee family in our area. These efforts, it seems to me, are so much closer to the Gospel story this morning, and to the mission of reconciliation that I believe that Jesus is calling us all to, than to so much of what is called religion in our country these days! Let us remember always that we are called to serve, and not to be served. Amen.