

Isaiah 55: 1-5
Psalm 145
Matthew 14: 13-21

Taking, Blessing, Breaking, Sharing
August 3, 2014
Mary R. Brownlow

Recently I saw a video of an encounter in Ivory Coast. The filmmaker went into the countryside and interviewed a cocoa farmer. He asked, "What happens to the cocoa beans once you sell them?" The farmer didn't really have any idea: he just knew that something was made that white people ate or drank. When handed a bar of chocolate, and tasting it for the first time, his face lit up. "It's sweet!" And he went off to other men in his village to share it. Then he took some to his workers in the under the cocoa trees and shared some with them. He said, "It's nice. Take some and pass it on. White people are addicted to it." One of them speculated that eating chocolate was the reason that "white people were so healthy." In some ways it was charming to see their faces light up with pleasure. One said, "We complain that growing cocoa is hard work. Now we see the result. What a privilege to taste it." "What a privilege." All this illustrated the fact that, without the intervention of the documentary team, chocolate was something these farmers could never afford, or even taste on their meager income. And perhaps it also reminds us to take a moment to really taste the goodness we experience so freely, every day.

The prophet Isaiah asks, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?": a rhetorical question, meant to illustrate the difference between human economies and divine grace. Jesus said to his disciples, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat.": a surprising reaction to the logistical nightmare of 5000 men (plus women and children) in a deserted place, far from the supermarket.

The issues of hunger and satisfaction, of poverty and generosity, of scarcity and abundance pervade our Scriptures and indeed, inform many religious traditions. Last Monday was the end of the festival of Ramadan for the Muslim community. This month-long festival, which moves through the solar calendar year, is an exploration of those themes. This year, in the northern hemisphere, the timing of Ramadan in the summer meant especially long days and short nights. Since people fast from both food and drink from dawn to sunset, this involves some serious hunger and thirst. After sunset, people will break their fast with dates and honey, sweetening the evening, end then eat a meal with loved ones. The rhythms of the Ramadan - daylight and increasing hunger, nighttime and sudden sweetness - help the faithful keep in mind the needs of others, and part of the ritual is increased generosity to the poor. All this reminds them to really taste the goodness in life that they experience so freely, every day.

Sometimes, when we read short passages from Scripture, we miss some important connections in the narrative, or some important contrasts. The story of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people is pretty familiar to us: it appears in all four Gospels. But today I read the beginning of the chapter also, the "preface," so to speak. It is as if the Gospel writer is saying, "Look, here is one kind of feast - the birthday party of a brutal tyrant - and here is a feast with Jesus - unexpected sweetness and abundance at the end of the day. Here is business as usual in a corrupt empire, and over here is a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven.

All of this sets us up for the question, which feast would you rather attend? Certainly, all the important people – those lucky enough to be wealthy and influential -would be invited to Prince Herod’s birthday, with his slightly scandalous family life, his excess of material goods, his fear of the crowd, his anger at the prophet John the Baptizer. If you could put up with all of the undercurrents of fear and shame and bravado, you’d probably get some good things to eat. But you would also have to witness the gruesome platter being brought to Herodias, and wonder whether you could enjoy dessert.

There are some problems with the other feast as well. When Jesus gets the news about John, all he wants to do is process it, alone. But “the crowd,” – the ones who revered John as a prophet, had also received the news, and they follow on foot, away from the towns and villages to the deserted place. This is not a happy gathering. This is the sort of crowd that gathers after a tragedy, like the people who came to this sanctuary after September 11, 2001, or the people who gathered on the Green after the Newtown shootings. Jesus sees this and knows this and has compassion. It says he “cured their sick,” but I wonder if this was more an emotional healing: the kind of gentle touch and word that we all need when grieving and confused.

As often seems to happen, the disciples have other priorities: they like to worry about logistics. Someone needs to. “This unsettled crowd, possibly dangerous, probably desperate, certainly hungry, should really leave now. Jesus, send them away to where they might buy food. We don’t have much here. Tell them to go back to where they came from, do the best they can.” The disciples are practical. But Jesus sees beyond practicality to a deeper truth and a deeper need and a higher calling. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

This story is usually called ‘Jesus feeds the 5000,’ but it could also be called ‘Jesus tells his disciples to feed the 5000’ or ‘Jesus tells **us** to feed the 5000.’ The disciples could have said, “no,” just as we can say “no.” The disciples had a very compelling reply: “We have nothing but 5 loaves and 2 fish” – about the normal rations for 2 people for a day. Not much. What possible difference could it make to share it? The miracle here is that they didn’t say no. They brought the food to Jesus. They got the people to sit down, as though at a feast. They watched as Jesus took the loaves, and blessed them, and broke them and gave them away. A foretaste of the Last Supper, a foretaste of communion, a foretaste of the sweet heavenly feast.

The last verse I read is sort of a throw-away: “And those who ate were about 5000 men, besides women and children.” It reminds us of how women and children are often the collateral damage of tragedy and poverty and violence. But they are also the “collateral repair,” included by Jesus (if not by the people doing the counting) in the restorative meal where all eat and are filled.

I know which feast I would like to be part of: the one in the deserted place with the crowd. But being there is not enough. What if we ignore those words of Jesus: “Don’t send them away. You give them something to eat.” We would miss out on something really important, a chance to be healed, a chance to break down divisions, a chance at the sweet taste of the goodness of community.

It turns out that we don not have to go to Galilee to have a miracle meal. Less than 5 miles from here is a place called Dismas House, and any of us could take some food, bless it, and divide it up and give it away. Plus, we could sit down with men and women who have started out on a path of healing and restoration. Eating there is a certain kind of feast, with the sweetness and savor of community, a blessing for anyone around the table.

We might have reservations or worries about this, just like the first century disciples. Let the residents of Dismas House get their own food. That's logical, practical, simpler. Rather than saying "We have only this little bit of bread and fish," we might say, "I really don't have time. My life is way too full as it is. And, I might feel a bit awkward, sitting down to eat with people I don't know, recently released prisoners. What would we talk about?"

In light of the Gospel story, our reservations and worries are just obstructions in our own path to the delights of the communal feast. Jesus models for us a kind of miracle: the breaking down of social and economic barriers, and the healing that comes with it. He models the compassion and humility that can take limited resources, bless them, break them up, and share them. This story points us not only towards communion, which we will share later, but also to sacramental living. Why do we spend our money on that which does not nourish, and our labor for that which does not satisfy? Nourishment and satisfaction and sweetness are here in community, and down the road, in community.

Gil Bailie, a Catholic professor of theology, once said in a sermon: "Eternal life is the experience of giving your life away and continually receiving life back." The give and take of the communion ritual symbolizes this for us. We drop our defenses, our reservations, our clutch on our meager resources, and open ourselves up to divine generosity. Taste and see how sweet it is. Amen.