

August 1, 2021
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Meditation: "Manna Happy Returns"

Well, vacation is over for the summer, for me at least, and I sat down to read the four texts that the Revised Common Lectionary identified as today's readings. The gospel in particular caught my imagination. In the days of the exodus God sent manna, the bread of heaven, to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness many centuries before Jesus' time. And then, in the gospel, Jesus declared that he is the Bread of life. All I could think of was that the bread was here, was no more, and returned in Jesus..... Manna Happy Returns! What the rest of the sermon has to do with the title is questionable. Perhaps the title is just a distraction.

Some years ago I was employed as a street outreach worker, working with the homeless in Toronto. I discovered that, like many others in our society, many of them were suffering from some type of profound pain. The source of the pain may have been anything from some traumatic childhood experience, to years of spousal abuse, or any one of dozens of different things. All I knew was that the pain left them with a deep and profound need of healing, but, like many of us, many of them weren't able to start the healing process, and for many different reasons. Rather than seeking help and engaging in the difficult, and often painful, process of healing their wounds, many tried to mask or distract themselves from that pain by other means. Usually, for street people, this means sex and drugs (including alcohol.) But street people don't have a monopoly on pain. Nor do they have a monopoly on distraction as a means of dealing with pain or unacknowledged need. We humans are masters at the art of distraction. We have lots of addictions, sex and chemicals are only two kinds. Some of us distract ourselves by eating, others by shopping, some by gambling, and others by vegging out in front of the television, still others distract themselves by playing video games or surfing the internet for countless hours.

Most of these addictions, in one way or another, involve the consumption of material goods. Now I don't for one minute want to leave you with the impression that material things are bad or evil. "God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good." A glass of wine with a meal at a celebration makes the heart merry. The embrace of a loved one melts away the cares of the world. A good meal at the end of a long hard day of work is necessary to keep us alive. The problem comes when we consume too much. Too much food makes us overweight and threatens our health. Too much alcohol not only threatens our health, but our jobs and our relationships as well. Too much shopping threatens our credit ratings and

puts undue stress on the environment, not to mention our closets. I didn't think that I had a problem with a desire for material things until we got to our campsite this summer. Yet, as much as I have to admit that I missed having a dresser to put my socks into or a recliner to lounge on, we seemed to manage just fine with our tiny trailer, that gave us a bed up off the ground and kept the rain off our heads, a few changes of clothes in a duffel bag, and a lawn chair to sit in by the fire pit.

As much as material gluttony is a problem, it is especially so when it becomes a means of distracting us from other things in our lives that also need attention. When we allow the television, the internet, the video game, shopping, eating or some what have you to dominate our lives it keeps us from spending time with those we love and depend on. If we let it, it would destroy every one of our relationships, including our relationship with God. In my book that would be a sin, because I think that God created us to be social creatures, to be in relationship, just as the trinity is in relationship, internally, and with us. Perhaps one of the biggest problems with these addictions is that no matter how much we have, it is never enough. There is never enough alcohol to drown our sorrows. Never enough crack to have that same high the first time we tried it. Or, if you are Imelda Marcos, former first lady of the Philippines, there are never enough pairs of shoes in the closet.

Just as we allow ourselves to be distracted, and even pursue distraction today, the crowds at Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee are distracted from what really matters. Only the day before, Jesus and the disciples fed the crowd of five thousand until all were satisfied. Jesus accuses the crowd of pursuing him to Capernaum for the sole purpose of filling their bellies. He urges them, saying, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." Their response starts off on the right foot. They ask what they must do to perform the works of God, but then they get distracted again, and by their bellies, no less. They want to know what signs Jesus will do. What will Jesus give them? Will he give them manna, bread from heaven, like Moses did when the Israelites were in the wilderness? Their concern is solely for what they will receive in a material way, and why not? After all, we are material beings, made of flesh and blood. But our bodies only last so long, just like the manna which perished if not used on the day it was gathered.

Jesus gets very cryptic and tells them “I am the bread of life.” Bread is a staple food. It is the minimum that we need to eat to keep alive. We need to eat it every day. I wonder, is the “Bread of Life” gluten free? Sorry for the distraction. I can readily imagine the confusion in the crowd. “Jesus says he’s the bread of life. What is that supposed to mean? We should eat his flesh and drink his blood?” Yet he tells them that “whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Small wonder the crowd is confused. If I had been part of that crowd I think I’d have given up on the work of figuring out what that kook, Jesus, was talking about and start worrying about my belly too.

So what is it that Jesus is trying to tell us? One of the lessons here, surely, is not to allow the things of this world to distract us from what really matters. One of the biggest things we allow to drive us to distraction is fear. We are afraid to ask for help because we think it will make us look weak or incompetent, when really it is a sign of strength, because we are refusing to give up. As a society, we are distracted by many things, here are just a few. We measure success with material wealth, and what we miss is that success should be measured by the number and strength of our relationships. We get caught up in our busyness, in our doing, and what we miss is simply being. We compare our lives, our success, even our self-worth with the lives and success of others, and what we miss is that our families and our friends, oh and God too, love us just as we are. As I said before, our distractions, if we allow them to, can become obsessions that will destroy our relationships with those we love, and with God. Jesus is reminding the Jews, and us, that the primary focus should not be the things that distract, but should be on God, and on God’s eternal realm. When we focus on living as though God were in charge of the world, when we treat everyone else with respect and dignity, when we ensure that everyone has what they need to thrive, when we act with fairness and compassion in every situation life takes on meaning, and is seen for what it truly is - a beautiful blessing. May God disrupt our distraction to the things of this world, that we might eat of the true bread of heaven and taste eternity. Amen.