

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
July 19, 2009
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“No Longer Strangers And Aliens”

Prior to the Gospel passage for today, the disciples have just been sent forth by Jesus, in groups of two. They can't take anything with them: “no bread, no bag, no money.” Wear shoes, but don't take a change of clothes. The disciples were obedient – according to Mark they “went out and proclaimed that all should repent.” They cast out demons and anointed the sick with oil to cure them.

When they return to Jesus they are understandably excited – they report to him “all they had done and taught.” They probably feel satisfied with their efforts; after all, they'd done just as Jesus had instructed them. People had been exhorted to repent, and the sick had been healed. Many lives have been touched. We can assume that they're tired from their travels – remember they had only a pair of shoes, and the clothes they were wearing – no donkeys to ride upon, no Rockports to cushion their soles. I'd bet the disciples would like nothing better than a leisurely meal, a long bubble bath, and a long rest.

Jesus must see their exhaustion in their faces and in their bodies, because he tells them to “come away and rest a while.” They climb into a boat, to go to a deserted place all to themselves, to rest and recuperate.

However, the disciples have been so successful in their labors, that they've attracted followers. I think of the crowd who arrived to greet the Beatles when they landed in the U.S. I suppose it's just like that - the disciples now have drawn their own collection of “groupies.” The disciples' message of repentance has come through; the crowds are excited by what the disciples have told them, have seen where they're going, and meet them enthusiastically when they come ashore.

Jesus has compassion for them – they are “sheep without a shepherd.” He sees the longing and the need of those in the crowd, and begins to “teach them many things.” As the day wears on and it becomes late, the crowd grows hungry. Since the disciples want to send them into town to buy food, we know that they are all far from their homes and any kin-folk who might be expected to provide a meal. The people are strangers to each other, drawn together only by their fascination with the work of the disciples, and the teaching of

Jesus. They have few common bonds, other than being drawn to the same place, at the same time, by the same man. And they are all hungry.

Meals at the time were important events; not only did they provide sustenance, they were an important link to family and community. Eating together as a group implied that you had common bonds – that you shared a set of ideas and values. That was certainly true for Jesus and the disciples – they clearly shared most of their meals. They broke bread together, talked about their ministries, maybe about the people they met, and the things they'd like to accomplish.

Eating meals together also usually meant that you were all of the same social class. You didn't eat with your social inferiors, or with those who were of greater status. Servants usually didn't eat with masters. Slaves didn't eat with owners. Roman historian Pliny the Younger writes of a banquet where what you ate depended upon your social status – those of the highest status enjoyed the choicest of foods. The lowest class, the freed bondmen, received precious little.

If you were Jewish, there was another whole set of dietary restrictions and laws governing how you ate, what you ate, when you ate, and who you could eat it with. Jewish people in the late rabbinic period wouldn't accept a dinner invitation from an ordinary Gentile – they wouldn't know if the food had been properly prepared, and properly tithed to the temple. If a Gentile were invited into a Jewish household to partake of a meal, they would have to wear a ritually clean garment provided by the host, so as not to contaminate the rest of the household. Jesus has already drawn the ire of the Pharisees for flouting these restrictions.

To us, a picnic in the wilderness might sound refreshing today, even relaxing. However, "wilderness" meant something entirely different to the people of Israel. When eating outside a civilized area, it was nearly impossible to prepare the food correctly, to ensure its ritual purity. You never knew who could have been there and contaminated the area before you. It could even be dangerous. Away from the civilizing influence of towns and villages, you could be set upon by bandits intent on taking more than your food, or even possessed by the demons and evil spirits rumored to inhabit such places.

Send the crowds away, the disciples suggest. Send them to a populated area, so they may buy food. The hour is late, and everyone is tired and hungry. But Jesus wants to do another new thing, above and beyond the miracles they have already accomplished. He says to the disciples, "You feed them." The disciples are incredulous – "Are we to pay for all

these people to eat?” they ask. They’re tired of new – they’ve done new things all day – they’ve traveled, and preached, and healed and ministered. They’re exhausted, and they’re shocked by what Jesus is suggesting. The disciples haven’t just believed new and impossible things, they’ve done them. And they haven’t even gotten a decent meal.

Jesus says, “What do you have?” The disciples take an inventory, and find the 5 loaves and 2 fish, which Jesus blesses, and then divides. The disciples watch the food multiply and serve the crowd, and there’s enough to go around, with twelve baskets left over. There’s a gracious plenty, more than anyone can eat. It’s a miracle, the bountiful plenty of a gracious God, divided among all of those assembled. In the kingdom of God, all are fed. No one is left out.

As many times as we’ve heard this part of the story story, as amazing as it is, the great plenty of food isn’t the only miracle that day. We shouldn’t forget the willing participation of the crowd. We already know this is a motley collection of people - they are likely to be not only Jewish, but also Roman, or even Samaritan. In fact, we are asked to imagine a crowd that is so large that it would encompass most of the population of the area, free and slave, master and servant, young and old, poor and wealthy, Jew and Gentile. All these people could have journeyed back to their homes, to share a meal with those more like themselves, in more comfortable surroundings. They could have at least gone back to a village or town, removing themselves from such an unusual and even risky event. After all, each of them had families, lives, obligations and concerns of their own.

But they stay. They participate in a new communion. In breaking bread together, in sharing a meal with each other, they make something humble into something sacramental. They become one body, drawn together by Christ Jesus – just as we do every week, when we celebrate the Eucharist together, when we break the bread, and pour the wine. We, too, bring our world-weary hearts, our problems and our concerns, our disappointments and our hunger – and we share in the one table, drawn together by the one Christ. Each week, we share the bread and the wine, and we affirm that even in the midst of our many differences, we are one people, one communion, one family of God. “(We) are no longer strangers and aliens, but (we) are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

Jesus isn’t just asking something new of the disciples, his weary and footsore companions. He is also asking those in the crowd to do a new thing, a previously unheard of thing. An extraordinary thing. Don’t worry about the cleanliness of the food, or the company or the

setting. Don't worry that your neighbor is a slave, or a Samaritan, or a Pharisee, or even a tax collector.

The disciples pass out the food, and you take it, seated in groups on the green grass, in the cool of the evening. You take the bread Jesus has blessed and broken, and you take the fish, and you eat. And, together, you share in this moment, in this new thing (communion) that has come to pass. You look around to your companions, to those who are so different from you, and you think, "Today, I have done a new thing." And you look over to Jesus, sitting and eating with his amazed companions, and you wonder, "What new thing might he lead me to do tomorrow?"