

Fragments of Grace
Ephesians 3:14-19 John 6: 1-21
July 26, 2015 Alan Claassen

Opening Song Bread and Roses

Song lyrics: written by James Oppenheim, inspired by a banner used in 1912 textile women workers' strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!

As we go marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.

As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.

As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses.

Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; bread and roses, bread and roses.

The feeding of the 5,000 is that only miracle story that appears in all four gospels.

The community for whom this story was first written, would hear in it the story of Exodus,

the liberation from slavery in Egypt and the journey through the wilderness,

hungry and lost,

looking for faith for the journey

as much as they were looking for food and shelter.

It is story of humanity, singing and "crying their ancient call for bread."

It is a story of humanity looking for someone who will lead them out slavery.

It is a story of the compassion of Jesus knowing that “hearts starve as well as bodies.”

It is a story of God’s blessing the little that we have in ways that are beyond our abilities to forecast or calculate.

It is the story of a people looking at the fragments of their lives with new eyes because someone they trust has told made them trust that there is more sustenance there than they can ask or imagine.

This story is the only one that appears in all four Gospels. So it can be enlightening to ask the question, “How does John use this story? What is the context?”

Our Gospel reading this morning begins with the words, “After this...”

After what?

So we go to chapter 5 to learn that Jesus had been in Jerusalem,

had healed a man on the Sabbath,

which got him in big trouble with the religious authorities.

So Jesus leaves Jerusalem and goes to the country,

the other side of the Sea of Galilee, up to a mountain top.

The wilderness.

Away from the Temple.

Away from the religious orthodox community.

He is with disciples, praying, studying, and resting.

He sees from his mountain top post a crowd of people coming.

After all, they had just seen him heal a man,

on the Sabbath,

and tell the so-called religious orthodox that they had no knowledge of God.

Let's go check him out. Let's follow him.

You know those beautiful golden rolling hills that surround us here in Sonoma County. Remember them in spring time, all green.

Imagine Jesus and his disciples taking the Overlook Trail and sitting on top of that beautiful hill.

Seeing a large crowd of people coming towards them.

Jesus knows those people are hungry.

For bread. For roses.

For beauty. For affordable housing. For dignity.

For not being the ten who toil while one reposes.

Jesus looks at the hungry people

and he looks at his disciples and thinks to himself,

“This is a teachable moment.

I wonder if my disciples have caught on yet to what I have been saying?”

So he asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for the people to eat?”

Philip offers what seems to be a good and factual answer.

“We don't have enough money to buy bread for this crowd.”

But the way in which Jesus sees the world there are a different set of facts.

Andrew, who has had a little more time to think while Philip pondered,

has been looking around and notices a young boy

with five barley loaves and two fish.

Andrew tells Jesus what they have on hand

and he might have gotten an “A” for the day if he had stopped there

but he keeps talking and reveals that he hasn’t quite got it yet.

Which is OK. That is why Jesus wanted this to be a teachable moment.

A sign of what it means to be living in the beloved community of God’s grace.

Andrew goes on and asks,

“But what is this, five barley loaves and two fish, among so many people?”

And then, ... away from the Temple, ...at a time when the Festival of Passover was near...

At a time when the people remember their ancestors’ freedom from slavery

and journey through the wilderness to freedom ...

At a time when the people are longing for freedom

from the occupying Romans who are stealing their wealth and resources. ...

At a time when the people are longing for freedom from their religious right wing leaders

who are closing their hearts in a restricted reading of Scriptures,

At that teachable moment Jesus turned the hillside into an altar,

He took the little that they had and turned it into manna from heaven,

He broke it, blessed it, and shared it.

And there was more than enough to go around.

Without faith, without trust in the abiding love and presence of Wholly Mystery/Holy Love

without new eyes and an open heart there are no answers to questions like

“What is this among so many?”

Without considering the needs of everyone,
the right questions will not be asked.

Without an imagination based up a loving creator still creating, still speaking, the possibilities in the moment cannot be offered.

What do you have? Five Barley loaves, two fish.

Take it. Break it open.

Bless it. Share it.

Jesus saw the hungry people seeking bread care,
he saw the sick people needing health care,
he saw the frightened people needing soul care.

Knowing God intimately, not as an idea or a philosophical concept,
but the source of life that emanates from every aspect of creation,
from the rivers to the mustard seed,

Jesus knew that trusting the beloved community,
and letting them know that he trusted them,
allowed him to begin with five barley loaves and two fish,
and end of with baskets filled with fragments of grace.

What are you longing for First Congregational Church of Sonoma,
United Church of Christ?

What do you have to offer,
break open,

bless

and share?

Back at the beginning of the summer I led a series of small groups

where I asked different versions of that question,

what are you longing for. I asked

When do you feel most alive in the life of this church?

What are the values of this congregation?

What your hopes for its future? Your wishes for this sanctuary?

What qualities are you looking for in your next minister?

Later this week I am going to send everyone my summary of the responses.

Then at our retreat on August 22nd, Rev. Carol Barriger and I will facilitate

an open discussion of those responses.

Our intention is that this retreat will be a sacred conversation

that will guide the next steps that this congregation

during the process of discerning what God is calling

FCC Sonoma to become at this time.

I want to share what I mean by a sacred conversation.

And to do that I want to share with you what Parker Palmer calls the 5 Habits of the Heart.

Parker Palmer is an educator, social activist, Quaker, and very funny fellow from Minnesota.

Over 25 years ago, he and few of his closest friends formed an organization called the Center for Courage and Renewal.

The primary program of the Center is the presentation of Circle of Trust Retreats; where teachers, clergy, lawyers, health professionals and others can come to regain their heart and soul, which has been exhausted by the demands of their profession.

These retreats are based on the Quaker principle that we all have an inner teacher, and when we create communities where everyone speaks from and listens for their inner teacher authentic individuals thrive and healthy communities come alive.

This Circle of Trust approach is beautifully described in Parker Palmer's book, A Hidden Wholeness.

A sacred conversation is one in which people are able to speak their truth without fear of being judged, corrected, advised, or shut down,

which means that people are listening to one another, without judging, correcting, advising, or shutting one another down.

Instead people are encouraged to trust silence and to ask one another open and honest questions that are meant to awaken the inner teacher within us—

as individuals and as communities.

And in this circle of trust new insights come from a deeper,

often hidden place within us—

a place we often refer to as our heart and soul.

Parker Palmer's latest book, Healing the Heart of Democracy, applies the wisdom of the Circle of Trust to the level of our society at large.

Just as his book, A Hidden Wholeness arose out his being broken-hearted by what he was seeing happen to teachers,

Healing the Heart of Democracy, arose his experience of being broken-hearted at the condition of our political systems today.

He longed for something that would speak to the “better angels of our nature,”

an approach to the common good that would be worthy of the human spirit.

Parker Palmer believes that in order to do this we need to be able to balance within ourselves

chutzpah and humility.

To achieve this balance Parker developed the Five Habits of the Heart.

In the four Sundays that I will be preaching in August I will be sharing these five habits with you.

I won't be in church with you all next week.

Grandpa Bill Hutchinson, will be your guest preacher.

I will be in Chicago,

as part of the design team for a four-day retreat presented by the Center for Courage and Renewal

called Habits of the Heart for Healthy Congregations.

In the remaining four Sundays of August after I get back from Chicago,

I will share these four of the habits of the heart with you.

Four habits? I thought there were Five Habits of the Heart.

The first habit of the heart is that to recognize that we are all in this together.

And we have already heard this beautifully exemplified in the way that Jesus was able to feed people a large crowd of people

He blessed what he was given and shared it and he asked everyone to do the same.

If you only take care of yourself, you'll have so little.

But if you take, break-open, bless and share the little you have,

you'll have so much that it is rolling all over the floor.

The first habit of the heart of democracy

is to realize that we are all in this together.

Jesus said that the kin-dom of heaven is among us, not one of us.

Share what you have; your barley loaves, your fish,

your stories, your art, your beauty, your broken bones and broken hearts

When we open up our hearts to one another,

the fragments of our lives can become sources of grace for others.

We can have bread and we can have roses.

More than we can ask for or imagine.