

2007-11-18 Crumbs MLB

Opening Words

We are here
as the autumn lingers
and the Thanksgiving holiday approaches
to worship, joining our own stories
to larger stories which speak truth to power
as they both challenge us
and nourish our deeper hungers. So we say

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

The table of the world is set.
The golden tablecloth of fallen leaves
has been spread sumptuously.
The sun, moon and stars
have been festively lit.
Our best dishes, those shining circles of friends, family and congregation, which hold our
nourishment, are placed before us.
The sweet cup of joy and sorrow
has been poured for the toast.
Everything is ready.
So let's pause for a moment of silent grace.

silence

Our vast table is surrounded by the faces of
those we love, those we find hard to love, and those far away and hard to see. We
name aloud, or quietly, all who especially have prompted our gratitude and thanks.

naming

Alleluia! We have gathered in peace once again, to celebrate with honesty and joy.

Readings

The First Reading *is from the book Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. It tells the story of an event where a large number of people...5000... were fed with only a few loaves of bread. Sorry, this is not a miracle story; this is a political/economic story, as you will see. Ched Meyers offers a reading of the text in Mark's Gospel in the New Testament in the more scholarly sense: a close reading, a reading where one really has to pay attention to every word and deliberate phrase. In the story, a vast crowd has been listening to Jesus speak all day long. The students, or disciples of Jesus*

suddenly realize they might be hungry, and they make a suggestion to Jesus.

The exchange between Jesus and his disciples is the crux of the story. Apparently concerned about the welfare of the crowd, the disciples suggest that the people be allowed to leave so they can go to the surrounding farms and villages to buy themselves something to eat. Jesus responds bluntly and emphatically, “Give them something to eat yourselves.” The disciples assume this means they are to spend their own money to buy food, a prospect that arouses their indignation. Scholars like Taylor detect a “tone of astonishment, amounting to reproof” in their response. Jesus then urges them to go see how much bread they have, which means they *do* have some with them.

Twice the disciples suggest to Jesus that the solution to the hunger of the crowds is to “buy” food. But Jesus’ solution has nothing to do with participation in the dominant economic order. Instead he determines the available resources, organizes the con-sumers into groups, pronounces the blessing, and distributes what is at hand. We should be clear that there is nothing “supernatural” reported to have transpired in the feeding of some five thousand; only that “they all ate and were satisfied.” The only “miracle” here is the triumph of the economics of sharing within a community of consumption over against the economics of autonomous consumption in the anonymous marketplace.

The Second Reading is a poem by the well-honored Kansas poet, May Williams Ward. This was written in 1929, the year of the Great Crash. It’s called: Crumbs

I watched the lad across the aisle,
my spread newspaper shielding me.
He did not buy his lunch,
but crumbed a sandwich on the sly
behind his copy of THE NEWS instead,
pretending interest in what he read.
He had a lean cheek, but a zestful eye,
few coins, but pride,--
four valid reasons why
he relished so his surreptitious bread.
The train ride ended;
it was fate that we should meet
and secretly begin to break
the bread of love and hungrily to eat . . .
Can those who gorge on whole loaves
openly be happier?
The long fasts we must take
because of poverty,
make crumbs more sweet.

Sermon

Breadlines. I heard a lot about breadlines from my grandparents. They were speaking of the Great Depression era of the last century, when the nation’s whole economy suffered terribly. Many people who were getting along well enough suddenly found themselves poor. So poor, they needed food they could no longer buy for themselves.

My grandparents grew food in their garden, and kept chickens back when that was still legal in the city. Still, despite their thriftiness and sense of independence, they remember those days as lean and hungry. They were glad when they were over.

And so, with this history of hunger in my family, it cannot be surprising that, by the time I was growing up decades later, food was more than food, bread more than bread. Every meal was a likeness of love, a species of nurture. Every table was lavish with the pride of having made it through the terrible days; they were victory feasts. In very real ways, every meal I ate with my grandparents in the fifties, sixties and seventies were Thanksgiving suppers, especially for folks, like my grandparents, who barely survived the bread-poor days of the 1930s.

The poet May Williams Ward talks about riding a train in that same era. She sits across from a gaunt young man who is eating a sandwich he had brought with him, instead of buying some food on the train. Or maybe had stolen some bread...the line "he did not buy his lunch" can be taken in different ways, I suppose. In any case, she sensed he was poor, relishing his bread perhaps even more than those who had plenty.

I guess she's saying something akin to the old proverb "absence makes the heart grow fonder." And certainly, I don't have to be convinced that a hungry person might indeed appreciate food more than a person who has access to three meals every day.

But I sense that she also tends to romanticize the poor young man's poverty. She symbolically breaks bread with him, she says, even though they are each hiding behind their newspapers, him with his crumbly piece of bread, her with her bought lunch. It's a lovely image, sure. But then she closes her poem by writing these words: *The long fasts we must take because of poverty, make crumbs more sweet.*

As I said, I'm sure if you are destitute you might tend to be thankful for every crumb you get. But I would like to offer that it would be far better to question the inevitability of poverty than to find some compensating solace in crumbs. I am not sure it makes sense to say that the fasts, or better, the hungers which accompany poverty, are fated, pre-destined, or fall into the "I guess this just had to be!" pit that so many seem to dig before my eyes these days. An earthquake or a hurricane may be inevitable, but poverty?

A couple of years ago, you'll remember the horrific tsunami that washed away almost 300,000 lives near the shores of the Indian Ocean. The fishing families who survived the disaster had been eking out a living for centuries, and, like my grandparents, were self-sufficient enough to feel a sense of pride. Oh, they were poor by every standard we use in the States, and yet they worked hard, shared their catch and survived well enough.

But, as soon as their villages were wiped away, large resort corporations found loopholes in local laws in order to claim the shore for themselves, to build fabulous seaside villas for those who can afford such things. They actually had wanted to do this before the tsunami; the tsunami just made it easier for them. And fishing people? They were told to "go fish," except, of course...they couldn't. As natives of the land, the law didn't permit them to go back home "for safety reasons." But the law had no problem with foreign investors...largely from the USA, building vast resort compounds that effectively prevented the former families from moving back and building their homes again once they were so permitted. Some of them were even kept in "camps" further inland; "camps" a word tainted by 20th century history.

New Orleans had a disaster too. Not an earthquake-caused tsunami, but a hurricane, Katrina. But before that disaster, there were many voices already talking about “cleaning up” the vast areas of public housing. The poor, you see, are more than poor. They are an embarrassment. There were also voices complaining that there was no prayer in public schools, and that religion was being kept out of the very schools which provided relatively free education to everyone, including the poor. The levees, as you know, were repaired with a truly remarkable slowness after Katrina. But, almost in the twinkling of eye, of the 123 public schools run by the School Board before Katrina, only four were left after Katrina. Most of the rest had become for-profit Charter Schools or private schools...where prayer could be said, but to which no poor parent could afford to send their children.

Also, our own national government did, in New Orleans, exactly what it had been doing in Iraq. The work of rebuilding the infrastructure was given to large corporations and their contractors. Journalist Naomi Klein, in her well-documented new book *The Shock Doctrine*, writes, “*Within weeks (of Katrina) the Gulf Coast became a domestic laboratory for the same kind of government-run-by-contractors that had been pioneered in Iraq. The companies that snatched up the biggest contracts were...familiar: Halliburton, Blackwater, Parsons, Fluor, Shaw, Bechtel...all top contractors in Iraq. Their contracts ended up totaling 3.4 billion; no open bidding required.*”

Which means, folks, we’re not talking about the romanticized “capitalism” of family shopkeepers and eager entrepreneurs. Without bidding for contracts, there is no competition, and competition is one of the central pillars of capitalist economic theory. There is nothing entrepreneurial about what happened in New Orleans. It was pure cronyism on behalf of those who have, so that those who have nothing can stay that way. They can live in trailers, eat at Faith Missions, get accused of being drug-crazed lazy bums, and perhaps, like the young man in the poem, filch a bit of bread to eat on the sly. A long time ago, the great Hebrew teacher Jesus summed up cronyism this way: “*Those who have plenty, get more. Those who have nothing have even that nothing taken away from them.*” (Mark 4:25)” And *that* bitter observation reminds me that this business of organized power brokers, or vast corporations who answer to no one, or large contractors who don’t pay their workers even minimum wage---or anything at all (which was true of 60% of the hired laborers in New Orleans, for example), has been around for a long time. In Jesus’ day it was the Roman occupation with its collaborators, like Herod Antipas, which pushed the population into poverty, making bread more of a luxury for many, not a daily staple. Apparently, the Romans assumed it was their right to take what was not theirs, since they did it with so little conscience. They felt they had a right to confiscate the lands of small farmers so they could create agribusiness instead. They felt it was their right to make overweening profits. And why not, right? Since being wealthy beyond reason has always been *everyone’s* goal hasn’t it? “Stop complaining, and keep on dreaming that you’ll win the lottery one day! You can be as rich as we are. You just hold on a while.”

The story from the Gospel of Mark offers us an alternative to “participation” in that “dominant economic order,” to use Ched Meyers’ words.

“Instead,” Meyers writes, “the Galilean teacher determines the available resources, organizes the consumers into groups, pronounces the blessing, and distributes what is at hand. We should be clear that there is nothing ‘super-natural’ reported to have transpired in the feeding of some five thousand; only that ‘they all ate and were satisfied.’ The only ‘miracle’ here is the triumph of the economics of sharing within a community of consumption over against the economics of autonomous consumption in the anonymous marketplace.”

In other words, the story is about sharing, or cooperation, not competition and one group of powerful people systematically trouncing others with economic clout. There was bread enough, apparently, but

no one wanted to share. The disciples are portrayed as being indignant because they think that Jesus has asked them to spend their own hard-earned money. Their resentment reveals to me that they are entirely caught in the dominant system, which teaches not social justice, social change, or the deliberate cultivation of a social conscience, but rather the right to be peeved that anyone is asking anything of anybody. Aren't we all autonomous, responsible only for ourselves? But instead, Mark's Jesus speaks of organizing together. Inviting people into groups. Where they can look into each other's eyes and see for themselves that they are brothers and sisters, not statistics. They are brothers and sisters, not the means to an absurd profit. They are brothers and sisters, human beings who have the power, yes, the power, to share earth's abundant bread with other human beings. Each of whom is infinitely precious for who they are, not what they amass, as our children's story affirmed this morning. Our worth is innate, not purchased at the price of the human heart, or wagered away on things.

When everyone "was satisfied," the story goes, there were 12 baskets of scraps and crumbs left over. The number 12 is not accidental, of course. It refers to the so-called 12 apostles, whom Mark's Gospel is always slamming for their foolishness and cluelessness. In this case, the story is critical of the way certain self-anointed church leaders, symbolized by the twelve, had taken the story of Jesus, *which was always about social justice in the first place*. But the church leaders made it over into a miracle-mongering wallow in shallow, smug piety: i.e. "I'm saved, you're not." Nothing nourishing there, the story insists. Just a few worthless crumbs left over, from what was once hearty loaves of bread.

It seems to me this story is saying, "Why would anyone have a vision of being insanely wealthier than everyone else? Why would anyone think that the good life is something you purchase or manipulate into being at the cost of other lives? No, the good life is when we share, not when we grab in panic. Why would folks have a vision of winning the lottery for themselves, when they could just as easily train themselves to see a vision of a world where folks share bread, not hoard it? Why would anyone have a vision of making a salary in the millions, like the CEO of Halliburton, and instead have a vision of shared abundance for everyone? Why would anyone offer crumbs, when they could have offered bread instead? The story says quite clearly: the bread always comes before the crumbs.

Breadlines. Broken-down trailers. Razed public housing. Laws which favor the powerful and keep the poor at bay. Using weather disasters to make a profit on the backs of the poor, while denying them access to a free public education...these are stale, nasty crumbs.

And, really, unlike our romantic poet, I don't think the crumbs taste all the better because hunger appreciates anything rather than nothing. I say, let's eat real bread, and not satisfy ourselves with the crumbs. Loaves are ultimately better, because they are a dignified and appropriate nourishment for both body and soul. Whereas crumbs are, quite literally, for the birds.

I say, bread is for breaking and sharing. But let not the have-nots be broken by the haves. Ever. What's that proverb I hear all the time? "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results." I say the old vision is insane. It has failed time and time again, as the Galilean pointed out. Time for a new, healthier vision. Time to awake to that vision. Now.

Offering

We do ask for your generosity of spirit as regards social issues in the world. And you always come through. And we see the results, incremental as they may be. But it's also true that we need to keep the heat on, clean the floors, pay salaries, and keep the building which houses our dream of social

justice for all in good repair. So, some of our members and friends bring a portion of the pledges they have promised to the church, for the church is the congregation of the people who agree to make it. Some mail their gifts in, but others prefer to offer their gifts in the context of worship, the time of the week where we consider our values, our ideals, our visions in our lives. If you are a guest this morning, or just visiting, it's ok to let the basket pass you by in peace this morning. Should you one day choose to share in the work of this good community, we will welcome your generous gift with gratitude, for generosity of spirit is the power that sustains any community of justice, learning and love.

Great Thanksgiving for the Breaking of Bread

Wendy: We are here to give thanks and break bread together. We share bread made of many grains the earth has brought forth, each different from the other, no two exactly the same. Like the people of the earth, these grains grow in many places. Together today, we break the bread of the world; we share the bread of life in peace.

Mark: Only bread is for breaking. The dignity and worth of each human life is not for breaking.

Eastern Voice: **Bread of the world given to us, nourish us with strength and wholeness.**
(break bread)

Mark: Only bread is for the breaking. The bonds of love and community are not for breaking.

Southern Voic: **Bread of the world given to us, sign for us the kind of sharing that leads to peace.**
(break bread)

Mark: Only bread is for the breaking. Our faith in the dream of justice is not for breaking.

Western Voic: **Bread of the world given to us, bid us share you as a clear sign of ideal community.**
(break bread)

Mark: Only bread is for the breaking. Our commitment to our common planet is not for breaking.

Northern Voice: **Bread of the world given to us, be the foretaste of a healing feast which no one will be denied.**
(break bread)

Mark: Only bread is for the breaking. Our determination to live our lives, without harming anyone with our unawareness, is not for breaking. It's morning now. It's time to get going. Let us nourish ourselves.

Caroline: Only bread is for the breaking. Our spirits are not for breaking, not now, not ever. All things are ready now. Let us keep the feast.

Communion

Blessing