

## Risking Hospitality

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Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you through Jesus our abundant salvation. Amen.

The feeding of the 5000 is perhaps one of those stories in the Bible that we've encountered so often, over and over since our Sunday School years, that we may find ourselves totally incapable of actually hearing its power. This is one of the only miracle accounts that appears in all four of the Gospels, which says to me that there is something fundamental to Jesus' ministry, in fact fundamental to Jesus' very self, at work in the feeding of the multitude.

Now, this week we move from Mark to John, though much of the fundamental structure remains the same. Jesus and his disciples move on to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and in Mark they are trying to get away, to take a vacation as Rev. Carlson said last week. However, word about Jesus and his signs of healing have spread so fervently that a massive crowd is following him. Here, Jesus sees them approaching and pre-emptively tests Phillip by asking "How do you suppose we're going to feed all these folks?" As is often the case the disciples try their best to make Jesus understand that this is a nonsensical question. We cannot feed all these people, we simply don't have the food. Not only that, but it would take half a year of fulltime work to cover the cost of such a meal. Simon Peter even brings a young boy forward to show Jesus their paltry supplies. "All we have is five barley loaves and two fish, so you see there simply isn't enough. Sorry Jesus, these folks are just going to have to go home. We'd like to help, but it just isn't possible." Jesus smirks, and invites his disciples to have the people sit down. He takes the bread and gives thanks, literally a eucharistic blessing, and simply starts passing it out, and lo and behold everyone eats their fill. In fact, John says they eat until they are "satisfied". Not only that but even after everyone had eaten their fill there were twelve baskets left over! This like the Olive Garden on steroids. And now the disciples are left with that goofy look on their face that I'm certain Jesus had gotten quite used to. Now this story isn't only about the miraculous power of Jesus as God's Son, but it reveals a fundamental truth of Kingdom living. When we risk hospitality, true and authentic hospitality, we inevitably discover the abundance of God's love in Jesus and in one another.

Joan Chittister, the Benedictine prioress and author, has argued that hospitality is the missing value of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and I'm inclined to agree with that assessment. More and more, especially in the US, we have become a people who are totally afraid of one another. We have retreated into our selves, into our possessions, into our work, and into our safe and insular circles. Martin Luther in his lectures on Genesis says, "What is more hideous than inhospitality? By it you shut out from your house, not a human being, but the Son of God, who suffered and died for you on the cross. Are you not willing to give Him the cost of one day's support or so much space of your dwelling that he may lay down with you?". There is perhaps no more tragic symptom of this lost value than the recent news from our country's border with Mexico. There is a pervasive and despicable criminalization of immigrants and refugees which is

reinforced by laws and policies that target vulnerable communities, separate children and their parents, and deny safe haven to those fleeing violence and danger, not to mention the Immigration and Custom Enforcement's continued cruelty and disregard for the wellbeing of our neighbors. We have allowed fear and the myth of scarcity to twist our minds and our hearts and to shut our doors to those in need.

On Thursday morning, a long time ISAIAH leader named Carlos who has lived in the country for over 20 years, was at a court hearing to ask the judge to stay a letter of deportation. Now Carlos had been detained by ICE before for several months while appeals and hearings took place. Finally, with help from ISAIAH and from his faith community, Carlos was able to post bail and to go home to his family. But last Thursday, as he left the court two plain clothes ICE officers suddenly grabbed him, without identifying themselves and without any explanation, forced him into an elevator and into detention where it seems his deportation is immanent. Over 150 faith leaders gathered that Thursday morning and watched the video of Carlos's kidnapping on a shaky and frantic cell phone video. The fear in Carlos' eyes will haunt me for long time, I'm sure of it.

Stories like that of Carlos are far more common than we might imagine. But this is the result of a cultural narrative that suggests that there simply isn't enough, enough space, enough resources, enough jobs, enough opportunity for all of us to thrive. It is the result of a cultural narrative that has rejected the value of hospitality and rather than giving thanks for the bread and the fish, and passing the food out to one another, we've built a fence around the loaves and threatened at gunpoint anyone who might approach it. Like the disciples we have forgotten that in the incarnate Christ there is abundance, there is enough, there is more than enough, if we will but open our doors and open our hands to one another.

Now when I say hospitality, I don't simply mean coffee and bars, though that's a pretty good start. Hospitality, authentic hospitality as a value, is something much more radical than that. Hospitality is a giving of our very selves to another in an effort to satisfy the physical, spiritual, and community needs of our neighbor. Thomas Merton writes in his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, "Christian social action is first of all action that discovers religion in politics, religion in work, religion in social programs for better wages, Social Security, etc., not at all to win the worker for the church, but because God became human, because every human is potentially Christ, because Christ is our brother, and because we have no right to let our brother live in want, or in degradation, or in any form of squalor whether physical or spiritual." This means that hospitality is more than simple welcome, but it is in fact the commitment to listening for and reacting to our neighbors need. Our neighbors are knocking on our door every time we see someone like Carlos being torn from their family. Every time we hear about parents being deported while their children remain in US detention. Our neighbors are knocking every time we hear bigotry, racism, and hatred lobbed at black and brown bodies. Our neighbors are knocking. Can we hear them? Will we open our doors?

Our hospitality is grounded in that old Benedictine line that “All guests who present themselves are to be received as Christ.” This kind of hospitality, the hospitality that Christ offers in our Gospel reading, is risky. It’s risky because it places our neighbors’ need above our own. It asks us to reject the mythology of scarcity and our fear of “not having enough”, like that of the disciples. It’s risky because it is given freely and without consideration of worthiness or righteousness. It is risky because it asks us to give up all that we have and trust in the hospitality of God and one another. It’s risky because it upends all our conceptions of how human relationships are supposed to work. Joan Chittister writes, “We have to learn how to take people in again or the poverty and the political hatred and the decimation of people and turning of our own lives into icy islands will never end. We must learn in this century again to open our minds and open our hearts and open our lives and open our talents and open our hands to others.” Hospitality that looks like Christ breaks down the false divisions and all the idolatries that keep us separated from one another. Our separation, and our distance from one another is exactly what the powers behind structural evil feed on. It is only in the continual and intentional practice of radical welcome and hospitality that we are able to challenge those power structures that feed on the oppression of our neighbors like Carlos. This is the hospitality we have committed to as a Sanctuary congregation, and we live into that call when we continue to build authentic relationships with one another, with those most directly impacted by those laws and policies that target immigrants, and with those decision makers who have the power to transform a cruel system. In these relationships, in this commitment to hospitality we begin to see that justice is not scarce, but that God’s justice is abundant and possible in a world that is hurting.

Hospitality that looks like Christ risks our very selves in service of our neighbor, because that is exactly what God has done for us in Christ. In Christ, God, the Creator of the Universe, the Ground of All Being, risked their very selves by taking on flesh and entering in to the human condition. In Christ, God risked Godself in human poverty, in religious and political occupation, in rejection and mockery, in arrest and in an extrajudicial execution. God obliterated our separation from Godself by risking it all on a cross, by opening God’s hands in a loving and radical act of hospitality. God in Christ meets us each as Beloved children and welcomes us into that love that Paul says surpasses all knowledge. This hospitality of Christ destroys all of those narratives that tell us our value is based on our ability to produce, on our physical appearance, on our gender or racial identity, on our ability to be perfect; perfect children, perfect parents, perfect students, and perfect friends. The hospitality of Christ says, “come to me all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”. The hospitality of Christ works in each of us to deepen our awareness of God’s presence, and of each person’s essential and fundamental Belovedness. The hospitality of Christ rejects the myth of scarcity and the criminalization or neglect of our neighbors and seeks the flourishing of creation and of all people through our action empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We have been set free in Christ to practice this kind of extravagant hospitality. The hospitality that pays no mind to our supposedly limited resources and offers us a foretaste of the

abundant and even wonderfully excessive feast to come. Like the disciples we may be tempted to circle the wagons around our time, our energy, our resources and say that there simply isn't enough. We'd like to help, we'd like to welcome everyone, but we just don't have enough. But in our Gospel reading today Christ gently asks that we simply sit down with one another, sharing one another's burdens, and trusting in the hospitality of Christ and one another. When we find our selves able to live into this kind of risky and lavish community we ultimately discover that love of Christ in one another that not only satiates our hungers, but spills over abundantly into a world in need of healing. Thanks be to God. Amen.