

Sermon

The Sunday next before Advent, 2020

Let us Pray: O Lord, we beseech thee, let thy continual pity cleanse and defend thy Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without thy succour, preserve it evermore by thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Stir up your wills”. What a way to end the Trinity season. Today's collect ends the longest season in our church year. But that ending begins strangely. It begins with these words: “Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people...” Most collects in our prayer book begin with an invocation to God. They usually start something like this: “we beseech thee, O Lord...” Not this Sunday. “Stir up...” it says. And so, this Sunday has gained the nickname of “Stir up Sunday.”

I have always imagined that this collect comes at us like a cold shower, stirring up our sensibilities to do the work of God. But stirring up is also a necessary process required to mix things well. A good dinner is always best when the elements are stirred together well and seasoned imaginatively. The sum is better than all the individual parts.

That tasty stew of combined foodstuffs is also a metaphor for Holy Scripture. All the passages of Scripture, once stirred together, give us the most nourishing spiritual food that God has ever devised; written for our spiritual health and well being; prepared to sustain us on our earthly journey; mixed by the hands of God for our eternal salvation.

This week, we celebrate the Sunday next before Advent. Next

Sunday, we celebrate Advent Sunday, the beginning of our church year. In two weeks' time, we will celebrate "Scripture Sunday," another Sunday with a nickname. It is called "Scripture Sunday" because the collect for that day calls us to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the words of Holy Scripture. Yet another metaphor for the food that God provides. We become spiritually healthy the more we "inwardly digest" the word of God.

And so we turn to the Gospel message for enlightenment , guidance and, yes, nourishment. And there we find St. John's record of the feeding of the five thousand. It is an important message. A vital message. It is a message so essential to our lives as Christians that all four Gospel writers include their own account of this particular miracle. It is a miracle that we all know so well. And there is the challenge. How do we make it new? How do we, especially those of us who have preached on this passage for nigh on thirty years offer a new perspective, one that will stir up the wills of us all at this holy time?

I thought long and hard about this dilemma. Food is a necessary part of our lives. Thanksgiving is close at hand. It will likely be a quieter celebration this year. But we will bow our heads and offer thanks for what we have been given. In years past, many of us have traveled to family gatherings. Ljuba and I often visited our daughter in Ohio. She is a better cook than all the rest of the family put together and we typically ate more than we probably should have.

I remember one occasion, a couple of years ago, when we traveled back from Ohio. We changed planes in Washington. As I sat

at a gate at Dulles Airport, I really didn't want to think about food. We were returning from a five day food fest. I had skipped breakfast and was actually looking forward to fasting a bit during Advent. It was past lunch time and I still wasn't terribly hungry. Ljuba convinced me that I should have something to eat. So I asked for a tuna sandwich. Light on everything. I handed her a bill. "Here's two hundred pennyworth," I said.

As she headed off to get our lunch, I reflected on that impending tuna fish sandwich. What a topic for a sermon. The hermeneutic of tuna. But I was reminded of the boy in St. John's Gospel. He had two small fishes. And they fed the multitudes.

Still, a tuna fish sandwich seemed hardly the best way to approach the feeding of the five thousand. But at that moment the man sitting next to me – a very old guy of maybe seventy or maybe seventy-two – turned to me and said: "busy day today." "Yes," I agreed, "this is one of the busiest travel days of the year." He agreed with me. He said that Atlanta was a real zoo. Then he asked me an interesting question. "How many people," he asked, "do you think are travelling through this airport right now?" "Well," I said, "the figure five thousand comes to mind." "Oh," he said, "many more than that."

He described how he likes to do interesting calculations. He pointed to the screen that shows the arrivals and departures. He counted up the number of planes and multiplied that number by one hundred. Most planes will be full at this time of year, he explained, but not every plane would have a capacity of well over a hundred.

Some would be much smaller. Like the puddle jumper that brought Ljuba and I from Dayton to Washington. He did some other calculations and arrived at a figure that he thought would accurately represent the number of passengers who would pass through Dulles airport on Friday, November 23, 2018. “Twenty thousand” he pronounced. “Of course,” he said, “I could be way off.”

“Sounds pretty accurate to me,” I told him. Several commentators believe actual figure that Jesus fed on that particular day was between fifteen and twenty thousand. There were five thousand MEN. But when you add in the women and children, the number would be much higher.

“Many of those people would need to be fed,” I noted. “Yes,” he offered, “and I understand you will be a recipient of a tuna sandwich. The end of the distribution food chain.” I paused for a couple of seconds and then repeated that phrase, “distribution food chain.” I told my friend that I would remember that phrase and promptly recorded it on my iphone. Then I reported that United Air Lines has an excellent pretzel distribution system. We had a laugh about that. At about that time, Ljuba arrived with my humble tuna sandwich, the end product of the distribution food chain.

Jesus took some very humble bits of bread and fish. Not too different from items that made up my tuna sandwich. He blessed them and had them distributed. Jesus could have snapped his fingers and had the food appear directly in the hands of those five or ten or twenty thousand people. But He didn't. He took them in his hands and blessed them first. Then He gave them to His disciples. They

were the ones who distributed the food to others. It is like that today. The food we take into ourselves at communion comes from God. But it is distributed by God's servants. It is a reminder that our wills should be stirred up to do the work of God in this world; to distribute the physical food to others. But also to distribute the spiritual food to a hungry and needy world.

God takes the most humble parts of our world and sanctifies them for His purposes. We remember that Jesus chose the most humble birth imaginable. No great fanfare. No parades. No fireworks. Rather, He chose to steal into the heart of the world at night when few were aware of His presence.

A tuna fish sandwich seemed hardly a very elevated metaphor for the beginning of Advent. And yet, the bread and the fish sustained God's people in their journey long ago. And those same morsels of temporal food sustained me on my journey as I traveled from Washington to Hartford. Not a bad way to start the Advent season.

I said goodbye to my friend. I never did learn his name. But he certainly gave me something to think about. And as I consulted my iphone, I reflected a great deal about God's food delivery system and how it keeps us alive in our journey with Jesus Christ.

Amen.

