

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Trinity, July 30, 2006

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“From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?” (From the gospel, Mark 7:1f.).

We returned Friday night from a week long work camp in Abbeville, Louisiana. Our group consisted of about two dozen adults and young people from our church, about a dozen people from St. Luke’s Church in La Crescenta and a half dozen from St. Thomas of Canterbury in Roanoke, VA. We worked on houses that were devastated, not by hurricane Katrina, but by hurricane Rita, Katrina’s less publicized sister. We repaired floors, walls, ceilings, roofs and garage doors.

The Monday before we left, another group from St. Matthew’s returned from Argentina, where they worked repairing churches that had been devastated by flooding.

The essential transaction of a mission trip is that one gives up some personal comforts in order to give something to others who are in need. In Louisiana, we slept on school room floors. There was no TV or radio and cell phone usage was notably curtailed. In Argentina the arrangements were less comfortable.

In Louisiana, the comforts were not greatly missed because two things were present. The work being done for others made one forget about the missing amusements. And there was opportunity to meet and interact with Christians from other parts of the country—St. Louis, North Carolina, Rochester New York—as well as greater opportunity to interact with each other. A life filled with these two things, service to others and meaningful relationships with people of faith, is a satisfying life.

These two things were (and are) at the heart of the life of Christ. He came, as he said, “not to be served but to serve.” And he spent his life developing relationships with those he called to be disciples. Sacrificial service and community; the cross and the communion of the saints: these are the things to which we are called and when we find them life is as it should be.

However, the world we live in discourages these things. I don’t mean that we are told, in so many words, not to serve and not to get to know people. I mean that the very aim and pace of life discourage these things. It is hard to devote one’s life to service when prosperity, pleasure and entertainment are really the main goals. It is hard to develop relationships when we are too busy to see and talk with each other.

In our culture, service is something you do on the side after you are done with the other stuff. And relationships are something one tries to “set aside time for” which is a confession that the relationships are not normally a priority. In this way, service and relationships are much like faith itself, which is relegated to the private sphere. It is something one does apart from “real” life. This is part of the disorder of our world. The central things are relegated to the sidelines and things that should be on the side are central.

We can look at mission trips in one of two ways. We can view them as digressions from what we normally do and from which we return to life as usual. Or we can view them as a model for the rest of life, as a leavening influence for all that we do.

There is a thematic connection between missions and the feeding miracle in the gospel today. Both take place in the wilderness; that is, in a place where people lack essential things. Biblically, the wilderness is a paradoxical place. It is a barren, dry place without food, water and the necessities of life. But the wilderness is also a place where Christ is revealed—precisely because, when people lack the comforts and necessities of life, they turn to him.

In the gospel Jesus led the people into the wilderness, into a place where they would be in need, so that he might reveal himself to them in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Lacking things, the people discovered Jesus, the source of all things and the satisfaction of all appetites. As Jesus said, “He who comes to me will never hunger and he who believes in me will never thirst” (John 6:35).

This points us to the Eucharist. Jesus gathers us around the altar, and away from worldly distractions to reveal himself to us. The liturgy does not aim at our outward wants and needs. The focus is on God and on Christ and not on us. This is why it seems so foreign to people who are trained to live in a consumer culture. Here, the usual means of amusement and distraction are not present precisely so that we might find Jesus.

The Jesus we meet at the altar is the same Jesus we meet when we serve others and when we enjoy one another in the communion of the saints. Jesus said, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25). Conversely, the presence of Christ is obscured to us when we live self-centered, distracted and isolated lives.

The Eucharist has a missionary focus. Jesus gathered the twelve around him in life and at the last supper to teach and feed them. Then he sent them out to serve. The word apostle means “one who is sent.” So Jesus gathers us around the altar to teach and feed us. Then he sends us out to “do all such good works as [he] has prepared for us to walk in.”

Mission trips highlight the truth that all of the Christian life is to be seen as a mission trip. And they challenge us to make the essential transaction of a mission trip a regular feature of our daily lives: Less focus on possessions and personal comforts and more focus on ministry to the needs we see around us.