

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
3rd Sunday of Easter Year A
April 30, 2017

The sun beat down on our shoulders, the gentle breeze glided across our faces, and our eyes feasted on the shimmering Sea of Galilee, detecting a lone fishing boat ushering men to the spot of plentiful fish, while on their morning route. We stood on the Mountain of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, the site of the miracle of Jesus feeding the multitudes, after a long day of teaching and preaching and after the disciples had advised Jesus to send the crowd away hungry in search of their own dinner.

The basilica commemorating this site held little interest for us, as our hearts and feet raced to behold the real thing – this small mountain upon which, as the story goes, Jesus fed the multitude, with barely a few loaves of bread and fish.

I'm not sure if we attribute sacredness to certain ground or if there really are places on the earth that contain, or draw you into, the sacred story more than others, but this spot held such a meaning for me. As I placed my feet, one in front of the other, on the rather rocky path made slippery with worn dirt made smooth by many pilgrims, I was taking with me the truth of that story of Jesus' giving plentiful food to everyone in sight. "That you may have life abundant" were the words of Jesus that became a mantra to me as I navigated the hill.

My imagination sprang wild, with images of young women sitting spellbound at Jesus' feet, of men pacing, uncertain of what the message of Jesus might mean to them, children giggling as they ran around on the hillside playing games, babies crying, toddlers squealing with joy. Satchels were opened and people were eating their sparse morsels of food, for these were peasants gathered, poor not just in spirit, but materially, and finding their daily bread was a major preoccupation. I smiled to myself as I imagined the chaos there, for I remembered that, in our creation story, God created our world out of chaos, and I was pondering the re-creation that was happening in order for these poor people gathered to be fed in multiple ways.

My ruminations were interrupted as our group made a stop, near a pinnacle point overlooking the sea, where we found the Eucharist prepared for us, on a rock altar under a sycamore tree. My heart burst with joy, for we would be receiving communion at the same place where Jesus blessed and broke bread and distributed it to everyone. Wow! As we congregated, the grace of Jesus flowed among us, repeatedly washing over us. It was a quiet, sacred, and holy moment that I wanted to hold onto forever. Wasn't this why I came to the Holy Land, for these life-changing experiences?

As Father Richard said, "Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit", dissonant noises erupted near us. There was laughing, loud talking, and giggling while people endlessly took selfies; another group had arrived at our same spot. They nearly stumbled into us, clearly breaking the stride of our service and nearly breaking apart our circle by running into us. They must have

realized the sacred moments we were sharing and holding onto with Jesus through the Eucharist. I couldn't imagine why they weren't silenced in respect of what we were experiencing, I couldn't imagine why they couldn't wait in reverence until it was their turn at the altar. I felt impatient, irritated, and as though the experience I was about to have, no, the experience I yearned to have, had been stolen from me.

Something needed to break: either they needed to leave, or something needed to break open within me. Because the waves of Jesus' love were still splashing across my heart, something within me broke open. Here's what happened: my assumption that the sacredness of the Eucharist depended upon the quietness and single focus of my mind splintered apart. My sense of entitlement, the sense that I had come here for these particular experiences and others had better not take them away from me was snapped in two, and the walls of presumptiveness that God would be found more fully in this Eucharist in this particular spot than any other time we break bread were torn down. I needed to break down these falsehoods, so Jesus could break through, and return me to the right path of understanding that Jesus came so all could be fed.

I wished I was the one celebrating the Eucharist, because I could have invited these folks, who had been "other" to me to join us. Think how much fuller that experience would have been to share it with another crowd, albeit a noisy one. Yes, the experience would have been different, but somehow, I thought it might have been more authentic to who Jesus was. Thanks be to God that Jesus broke through and put a sense of abundance into my heart.

I couldn't offer the Eucharist to the other group. I wasn't the celebrant and it wasn't mine to invite. But I could give smiles, I could give welcoming looks, I could give a sense of community to the others waiting their turn. For now, it was revealed or made clear to me, as I returned to my mantra during my walk down the hill, that the table is for everyone, so we all, together, may have life abundant. Perhaps this is why, when our young people, anytime and anywhere, who are serving in our worship, look at me with pleading eyes to join me at the altar, my heart says "yes". Perhaps this is why, when the Lutheran pastor shows up on Easter Eve vigil, I immediately invite her to vest and concelebrate with me. Perhaps, this is why, when I hold the hands of our friends in care and prayer who come to our community meal, I understand that the breaking of bread we do on Sunday is extended to them through our loving touch. Jesus' love, Jesus' radical hospitality, Jesus, who didn't send the peasants away to find their own supper, that Jesus is for everyone, all together, so all are fed. This sense of abundance showed up in our generous hospitality on Good Friday, when our welcome was so genuinely felt to our community brothers and sisters in Christ, that all the ministers of our ecumenical group spoke from their heart to me this past week, of how moving our welcome was to them and their people. I believe that abundance of generosity and welcome is an expression of what we do here on Sunday and it has become our identity. We don't even think about it; we just do it. The breaking of bread we experience here on Sunday is taken out to reach all. Thanks be to God!

When Jesus' firm hands broke the bread, as he was seated with the people walking away from Jerusalem in our story today, they recognized him in this gesture, for his essence, the truth of what he was all about, was revealed. God's justice of feeding everyone abundantly, broke

through. They would have felt the heart-tug to remember the Last Supper, which would have drawn them further back to the celebration of the liberation of the Israelites from the oppressive Egyptians, and somewhere in between those two defining events, they would have remembered that afternoon when a few loaves of bread and fishes fed everyone in sight, on that same hill which I traversed, that warm sunny day in the fall. Jesus' message, then, was that we all must be liberated from whatever oppresses us and others, not just spiritually, although that matters, but also politically, economically, and socially, be it from an imperial state in which few rule many, as with the Roman empire, from economic systems that allow poor people to go hungry, or from social systems which attempt to exclude some from the grace of God. Jesus says we must be liberated and liberate others from whatever oppression exists.

Each time we spoon out healthy, wholesome food onto plates for our friends at the community meal, or each time we knock on the door of someone's home to deliver a meal through Meals on Wheels, or each time we place a few dollars in our SPO egg donation baskets, or each time we greet the residents of Bethesda Mission with a smile and ask them whether they want their rice and beans together or separate, or each time we pick apples from the trees as we glean, or as we will plant vegetables today at WIN, we are helping people right in front of us be fed abundantly. This is Jesus' directive, and we are also bringing about a part of God's dream for our world, by working toward justice, God's justice, where all are taken care of.

The people on the road to Emmaus were not only leaving Jerusalem but also the dream of Jesus as their messiah. Here, they were not disciples, they were deserters, heading back to the Roman garrison, ready to allow their lives to be dominated by an unjust political system. Jesus intervened and brought them through the steps he took on that hill near the Sea of Galilee and in the room where he ate with his disciples that last night: take, bless, break, and give.

The disciples took with them their broken hearts, their sense of foolishness for believing in something good, perhaps some hurt pride, because they thought they were right and it turned out they weren't, or at least not at this point in the story. They took all of this brokenness and betrayal and walked away. But Jesus comes alongside them, and they invite him to stay with them, perhaps just as a common gesture of the day, or perhaps because they had a sense that something wanted to be broken open within them. And it was. Jesus broke open the bread and broke through as the Risen Christ. The two travelers broke open their blindness to see another way. The now-disciples gave it all away, by their action of running back to Jerusalem, full of confidence, giving their story and their lives for others, so that bread could be broken for everyone, and all can be fed.

We travel this path each week. We take all of our lives, our hopes, dreams, weariness, joys, questions, anxiety, and sometimes broken hearts, and we gather it all together and present it at the altar. We say it best in our Rite 1 Eucharistic Prayer, "We offer ourselves, our souls and bodies". We take and present all of us to God. This may happen when you walk through the red doors, when you stand in your pews, when you sing out your heart, when you place your financial offering in the plate, when you take the pilgrimage to the altar, or when you stretch out your hand to receive. We take it all and present it to God.

Then God blesses our offerings. This can happen at many moments, but often this is when we allow the light and love of Jesus to show up in the broken bread, when my hand touches yours, when the light floods in through the window.

Then something needs to break. Something in us needs to break down. These can be places of entitlement, or prejudice, or fear or need of control, or something in our heart which allows our sins of commission or omission to oppress others. We all have something that needs to break down so Jesus can break through, and God's justice can be for all.

Whatever that is for us, as soon as we let it go, break it open, Jesus breaks through. Watch today when I break the bread. Attend to what's going on inside of you. What brand new revelation is God offering to you this morning? Or maybe it will be a remembrance of another time when you felt the presence or knew the essence of Christ. But Jesus will break through to you, as you break down some barrier, that allows God's dream of justice to be here on earth.

And then, just like the disciples running back to Jerusalem, we give it away, our stories and lives, we give all to following Jesus, so that the bread can be broken for everyone and all can be fed, in spirit and in body, and God's realm can come near. Amen.