

July 22, 2012

**The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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When I first read today's Gospel selection from Mark, I thought about giving you a sermon about taking a break, about resting, about going away, regularly to your own "deserted place" either actually or metaphorically to renew your spirit and revive your soul. I think rest, real, intentional rest, is good for us. I think it helps keep us creative, focused on what is important and keeps our tanks from going totally dry.

But I'm not going to preach that sermon and I'll tell you why. First and foremost, you know that already. You know that we are commanded to keep the Sabbath. You know that Jesus rested. You know that you are a better, happier and more stable person when you have a full tank.

And while it is always good to be reminded of these things, even when we know them, there's another reason that I'm not going to preach that sermon. Because I know that some of you here have good reasons not to rest right now. You are in the trenches. I know you have brand new babies or sick family members. I know some of you are in mourning or planning a wedding. I know some of you are waist-deep in crisis. You know who you are. And you know that this season you are in will end eventually, so I won't beat you over the head with one more thing on your plate. I know you will rest when you are able. Stay the course for now.

Let's talk instead about sustenance. One of the most poignant lines of this morning's Gospel readings, to me, even amidst the sheep and shepherd, the great crowds, the sick and healed, is this one: Many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

We live in a culture of meals-on-the-go. We eat in the car, at our desks, while we walk. School lunchtimes are getting shorter to accommodate increased school requirements. Family mealtimes are getting scarcer to accommodate increased activities and late work nights. We eat alone so often just so we can multitask and get whatever we are doing done.

There is so much eating in the Bible: Abraham and Sarah entertain angels, the Israelites eat manna in the wilderness, the wedding at Cana, Martha and Mary's hosting Jesus, just to name a few. I think that Scripture's emphasis on meals together makes this one little side statement even more pointed. They didn't even have time to eat. This is not a statement just on their nutritional intake, this is a statement on their community and spiritual health as well. And it is a sad one.

The same can be said about us: we are so often coming and going, we have no time to eat. There are plenty of good reasons for it. We are end-to-end most days, we are being asked to work harder and longer, our families have more expectations and activities that pull us apart.

But what we're losing is more than nutritious food. We are losing our connection between feeding and being fed. We are missing the opportunity to be with one another in a time of shared need.

We are giving up the honor of sitting with people we love while we and they hear the word, pray and confess, while they take, break, eat and drink and go out into the world.

Wait... what?

OH! You thought I was talking about evening family spaghetti dinners? Well yes, of course, those are vastly important, too, but you know that. Those, to, are part of the fabric of community.

But that's not the meal I'm worried that we're missing.

Last week, Elizabeth talked about the plumb line, those things that pull you straight and keep you centered. She mentioned the rule of life that we will soon be asking our resident interns to create for themselves. Consider yourselves warned: we will be talking about a rule of life a lot around here in coming months.

A rule of life is not so much a list of do's and don'ts, but rather an examination of being. It is a way to figure out what you do and why you do it, then make adjustments and alterations in order to make yourself stronger, more focused on what is worthy of your attention. A rule of life is about rhythm of life, and adding and subtracting to that rhythm in order to create balance.

It can be simple as an ordering of your day like remembering to pray before dinner, or it can be life-changing habits like learning to practice authenticity in your dealings with people.

A rule of life can help you figure out what keeps you plumb and level. And if you are off-kilter, a rule of life can help you recenter.

I'm certain that most of you have heard about or read about the back-and-forth going on between op-ed pages of various major publications in the wake of our very own General Convention this month. Word on the street is that Christianity is out of touch and dying.

In his New York Times article of the same title, Ross Douthat—an active, practicing Roman Catholic—asked Can Liberal Christianity be saved? Citing

steady decline in membership and attendance in mainline Protestantism over the last four decades and looking expressly at the Episcopal Church, Douthat attributes this decline to as he puts it, the Episcopal Church's shift "from a sedate pillar of the WASP establishment into one of the most self-consciously progressive Christian bodies in the United States." In that shift, Douthat posits, we have lost our own center. We have lost sight of the core values that make us Christian first and above all else. Society is responding to that loss by giving up church. There is nothing, says Douthat, that liberal Christianity is offering the world that liberal secularism doesn't already offer.

With all due respect to Mr. Douthat, I do not believe that we have lost sight of our plumb line. We know that all things are possible through Christ Jesus. I also think that anyone who believes that we have lost sight of that which is of deepest value in our tradition hasn't visited an Episcopal Church recently.

Precisely because we eat together. We share at the Eggnomics Breakfasts and at Covenant Community dinners. We share at parish picnics and Wednesday night suppers.

But more importantly than that, we eat together here, at this table. I've made no secret over the last eight years in this pulpit that I value deeply the time we spend around this table. In lofty theological terms, I do believe it is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, where pain and sorrow are no more, just life everlasting. I think individually, it is where we can spend a precious few moments of our valuable time to recharge ourselves for the hard work we do in the world outside.

But above all that, I think it is where we are THE BODY. We are together, we are equal, we are whole and holy, rich and poor, young and old and single and married and gay and straight and everything else. We feed and are fed. We accept each other at the table, broken and exhausted, and remind each other that we are, indeed, perfect.

This is what is so poignant about this part of this morning's Gospel: they were so busy they had no time for THIS. This is not about filling bellies, this is about nourishing souls. We need both. This is part and parcel to our own rule of life, our rhythm of being, as a community. And while I know some very happy atheists out there, secular liberalism doesn't have this.

And so, as we continue to talk about our Christian expectations of ourselves and our families, I want you to think of Mr. Douthat as you think about what your rule of life might look like. And I want you, as individuals and as a body, to prove him wrong. Show him and all of those who doubt that Christianity can survive as long as we value—as we always have—a Gospel of love and abiding acceptance that we will not only survive, but we thrive. We show up. We do good work. We bury each other's loved ones, we bless each other's babies. We make time to eat and be nourished by each other and by Christ Jesus, our perfect and holy plumb line, the one who continues to pull us upright, vertical and level.