

August 3, 2008

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 13 (Matthew 14:13-21)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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“Take, Bless, Break, Give”

Over the years I have noticed that people respond in different ways to the very word “problem.” If you say, “Now the problem with that is... (fill in the blank)” the most widespread response is a negative one: analysis and explanation; anxiety, if not downright fear. A ‘problem’ is something that needs to be solved, fixed, or resolved in some way. A common response was summed up for me one day by that great contemporary theologian direct from the comic pages, Andy Capp. In the first three frames of that day’s strip we learned that Andy’s rugby side had lost another one and we heard the theories of whose fault it was: the referees, the field conditions, the cheating opponents. It was in the last frame that Andy turned to us readers and summed it all up: “It’s not whether you win or lose; it’s where you place the blame.”

Avoiding the problem by assigning the blame can make little progress. In leadership positions over the years I learned not to call something a ‘problem’ but to call it an ‘opportunity.’ A problem must be solved; an opportunity can be a challenge to be lived into. It is more than just the intellectual response that can be changed; the very emotional reaction can evolve and grow. When the attitude changes, so can the response.

So, how do you receive the opportunities before you? All kinds of things are coming our way all the time: crowds, traffic jams, family tensions, office climate, career challenges, persistent habits and temptations. When something comes your way, especially something you cannot avoid, how do you take it up?

Do we possess it physically? We could be subject to the bumper sticker wisdom that whoever has the most things when he or she dies, wins. Do we only take on the opportunity if we can negotiate a good mortgage? Do we articulate the conditions under which we can proceed? How do we make space for a thought or a thing or a challenge? To what extent is our response based on the relationships we recognize in it? Will we enter into receiving it cooperatively, in a participatory manner, or are we determined to only receive anything exclusively? And how does any of that change our emotional response? Is there a limit to what we can take?

And then there is the challenge of evaluating how good a thing it is that just came your way. Is it a blessing? How do you bless something? In my line of work there are certain roles in which we priests can bless. If you look up what we usually call a wedding in the Book of Common Prayer you will find it is entitled *The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage* (p. 423). In the Greek New Testament the word we normally translate as *bless* is the word *eulogesen*, the word we would render in English as *eulogize*. That can remind us of sometime funeral practice of a eulogy, a summation of all the fine points we remember in the life of the deceased. That is, to remember all those highlights is to recall

the ways we have benefited, the ways we have been blessed through the experience of that life.

Such a treasure is a wonderful thing that we can honor and delight in. But time always moves on and even the greatest treasures are not preserved at all costs. They are most appropriately used, put into action. If you consider the greatest philanthropists of our culture you can see the wisdom with which they clarify and address what are for them the greatest issues. Education, health, the environment, economic development, gender, race, or religious distinctions, even the old alma mater or parish church, for that matter, can benefit when treasures, great or small, are not preserved, but are broken up. To render a treasure into pieces is not necessarily to diminish it. To break it up is not just the negative end but can also be the positive seed for the future. To divide is not necessarily to diminish, but rather can be the beginning, that which extends the impact, the effect itself.

That which is broken can be given away. We can hand it over, transfer the possession. Does that diminish the possessor? It all depends on whether reality is a zero-sum proposition. If all there is in the world is a fixed amount—of oil, gas, coal—there is little hope for our highly entangled and technical means of transportation to survive for ever. Gasoline alone is giving us another supply and demand experience. But if there is enough in the problem to make us realize that it is indeed an opportunity, then even T. Boone Pickens may be telling us something important.

What is really clear, to me at least, is that one of the things genuine leadership requires is the capacity to get things done through other people. If you want something done right, do it yourself. The only problem is that there is not enough time in the day or brain cells in any one of us to get it all done. So how do we get there other than together, in that glorious paradox of individuality and community: We can only be ourselves in the matrix of relationships, and we can only have whole healthy relationships if we develop our individuality.

This is what Jesus was teaching that day at Tabga on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew tells us that Jesus had just learned of the death of John the Baptizer, the one Luke tells us was Jesus' cousin. Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself, Matthew tells us, but as usual the crowds heard about it and followed him. A pretty good throng of 5,000 men and their women and children had gathered and he taught them. Toward the close of day the disciples advise that it might be best to send them all away so the folks could rustle up some food nearby. To this Jesus responds with what may be one of his most unsettling but direct responses: "They need not go away; you give the something to eat."

How in the world are we going to do that? Must be ten thousand of them out here and all we've got is five loaves and two fish.

"Bring them here to me," is his response. And then look what Jesus does with what comes to him: "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and

blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.” (Mt. 14:19)

What we have here is an outline of the life of Christ and, by extension, an outline for the life in Christ, the life of the Christian.

He took. We are to take. We are to receive all the time, talent, energy, even wealth that comes our way. We are to have it responsibly, responsively. When it comes our way it is ours to have, to use, to enjoy.

He blessed. From where and from when does all this we have come? To bless is not so much to be in a position of authority within the community. Yes, clergy pronounce blessings. But we all are to do this. One of my suggestions on developing a prayer life is in a little abbreviation I coined for myself, summarized in these initials: STB/ATS. They stand for: Seek The Blessing/Acknowledge The Source. That is, in every circumstance or encounter, even in the most tragic, there is the greater view of reality. What is the blessing? Even if it be mere survival, how is that useful? If it is delivery from further pain and suffering, even if death itself, is not that its own painful blessing? It can take a long and arduous path for the journey to unfold, to develop. But to acknowledge the source is literally to bless what we have received.

So he broke it. Bread is only useful if it is consumed. To divvy up what is before us is necessary in order to put it to use. In some very real sense we can only expand it if we expend it.

And so he gave it. He simply had his followers hand it out. This is not a lesson in political economics. This is a lesson in something greater; a lesson in love, that genuine article of the love known as *agape* in the Greek. To love someone or something is to give yourself to it. It might be as simple affection or even friendship. It could be as wonderful as *eros*, the giving of oneself with some expectation of return. Or it could be this distinctly New Testament concept of love, the love of Godself evident in Jesus: the giving of oneself with no expectation of return.

A key to that kind of love being effective is thanksgiving. It is to reflect and realize and respond. The love we receive from God is not because of anything we have done to deserve it. It is the regard for us of One who knows us better than we do ourselves. It is the assurance, the actual experience of what Paul Tillich once described as realizing that we are “accepted though unacceptable.”

And finally, it is that fourfold outline of take, bless, break, give that is expressed in another New Testament Greek word made real in what we do next, in the liturgy in which we participate right now: the word *eucharistea*, the Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving. Our outline of thanksgiving is in response to the great gift of new life in Jesus Christ.

It is the challenge of looking carefully by living the life of a devoted disciple, by imitating the one who has gone before and shown the way, to see whether this is only a limited, zero sum game or whether there is an infinity to God's grace.

What today will you take? How will you bless it? Will you then break it? How can you most effectively give it?

To do that would be to live a Eucharistic feast, a great thanksgiving indeed. What a great opportunity before us. No problem.