

Practicing the Presence of God

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 14: 13-21

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I think it is clear that whenever anyone in this world is hungry, it is an affront to God. If you believe that God made everyone in this world with dignity and you do not believe that anyone's hunger is offensive to God then it must either the case that you have not gone without food long enough to understand hunger or you do not understand what dignity is. But you cannot both believe that God made everyone with dignity in this world and that it is okay for some people in this world to be hungry while understanding what both hunger and dignity are. Now, I could quote a hundred bible verses if I wanted to in order to make my point. But why do that? Why make this sermon any longer than it needs to be? I think it should be obvious to anyone that allowing someone to be hungry in this world when you can do something about it is a serious sin, and I wouldn't even know what to say to someone who didn't agree that this is obvious.

But despite that, while I have often heard this story about Jesus feeding five thousand to talk about our mission in the church to feed the hungry, if the truth be told, I don't think feeding the hungry has much to do with this story, at least not those who are hungry in that way, it is not about feeding those who are starving. Now, having said that, I don't think there is necessarily anything wrong with using this story to talk about feeding the chronically hungry, but the people that our Lord fed in this story were not necessarily undernourished nor malnourished nor chronically hungry.

As the story goes, after Jesus had learned that John the Baptist had been executed, he went out by boat to a deserted place to be alone, as we often want to be alone when we are

distraught and grieving but despite these efforts a large crowd followed Jesus. So our Lord spent some time healing the sick among this crowd, that is, until the hour got late and the disciples told Jesus he needed to send them away so they could buy food in the surrounding towns and villages. This crowd of people were not starving in some famine, it was just dinner time. This crowd was no more hungry than anyone gets who has never missed a meal. It was then that Jesus told the disciples that the crowd did not need to go away, but they could give them something to eat. "Master," they said, "we only have five loaves of bread and two fishes." What is that among so many people? And you know the rest of the story. You know how Jesus used the power of God to make the five loaves and two fishes enough to eat for five thousand people, enough in fact for this entire crowd to eat and be satisfied with enough food left over to fill twelve baskets.

Now, again, I don't see anything wrong with using this story to talk about feeding the chronically hungry, but if I don't think that's what this story is about, then what is it about? Well, if I am going to answer that question, I think we need to start with making some assumptions about this crowd of five thousand. And that seems like a dangerous thing to do, because this crowd of five thousand people is not a crowd of people whose names we know, it is not a crowd whose faces we know, and it is not a crowd who lives in a time and place that we really know a whole lot about when it's all said and done. But, in spite of all that, I think we can at least say that they came out to see Jesus knowing that he was in some way a holy man, knowing that in some way he was divine, and knowing that as they sat in his presence they were in some way closer to God than they had ever been in their lives. And then, I think we may be able to assume something else about this crowd. I think we may be able to assume that this

crowd of people probably thought that this holy experience was just a little too holy for them to do something in the midst of it like eat a meal. Now, why would they think such a thing? Well, this may be hard for us to understand as Christians who eat and drink in communion as a regular part of our worship, but as all of us know, there are certain things you just don't do at certain places. You do not dress for a day at the beach the way you would dress for a day in court and you don't dress for a day in court the way you would dress for a day at the beach. You do not answer your cell phone if it rings in a wedding. You really don't answer your cell phone if it rings and you are a part of the wedding, even though it's bad enough if you are a guest. You don't yell and scream in a library like you would at a ballgame. And you don't sit quietly at a ballgame reading a book like you do in a library. There are certain things we do in certain places that we wouldn't do in other places, and I think this crowd thought that eating was just something they wouldn't do in the presence of someone as divine as our Lord. Eating was just a bit too ordinary and bodily for this spiritual and extraordinary man. But Jesus tells his disciples that this crowd does not need to go away to eat, they can eat right here in his presence. They don't need to go to the surrounding towns to buy food, they can have their food right here. They can fulfill their ordinary bodily needs right here in the presence of the divine.

There are certain things about how we act that we learn at an early age that do not mix. We do not mix cell phones with weddings, we don't mix swimsuits with courtrooms, we don't mix library behavior with ballgame behavior. But sometimes I worry that at an early age we also learn that there are certain places on this earth that should not be mixed with the presence of God.

Ever since Edmund Hilary and Sherpa Norgay first reached the top of Mount Everest in 1953, more than four thousand people have repeated their success. But sadly in an attempt to reach the peak of Everest, about 290 people have also died in that valiant effort. Nine of those deaths came in the spring of 1996 when Everest was hit with a murderous storm. On their ascent, a man named Eisuke Shigekawa and his team passed two of those climbers who were near death from the storm and altitude sickness, but they did not stop to offer water, bottled oxygen or any other form of help. Instead, they simply kept climbing. When he was back on level ground, a reporter asked Mr. Shigekawa why his team didn't aid two human beings in such mortal peril, and he said "Above 8,000 meters is not a place where people can afford morality."

What does that mean that you cannot afford morality above 8,000 meters? What does it mean that you can't save a life above 8,000 meters? I don't know. But we've all heard things like that before. We have heard that just like there are times and places for library behavior and times and places for ballgame behavior, there are times and places for God, there are times and places to be in the presence of the divine. Just like we have heard that everybody knows or everybody supposedly knows that you're not supposed to talk about religion at a cocktail party just like you're not supposed to talk about politics at a cocktail party. It's considered rude. You're supposed to stick to noncontroversial things like the weather, and leave the religion for Sunday morning. And everybody knows or everybody supposedly know that the preacher is not supposed to get up on Sunday morning and talk about personal things like what you do with your money because what I do with my money is my business and not the church's business. And my friends, lest anyone think I'm about to run through all your private pledges, I agree that what you do with your money is in an important sense your business and not the church's

business. But I have also been in ministry long enough to know that what people usually mean when they say that is what I do with my money is not the church's business is that it's not God's business. And everyone knows or everyone supposedly knows that true devotion to God, true authentic devotion to God does not take place in something called "organized religion", a phrase that is always said with a sneer, but in something called spirituality, ahh spirituality. I'm not always sure I know what people mean when they say they're spiritual and not religious, but what I picture in my own mind is someone who thinks that devotion to God is all about sitting on top of a mountain and not being bothered with such nonspiritual things as meetings about tuning organs and keeping lights on, and debates about controversial social issues such as abortion and homosexuality and racism. You know, whenever I hear people say all these things about what everyone supposedly knows, I think I can almost hear the Lord saying "Why don't you get out a sheet of paper and make me a list of all the places in your life where I'm allowed to be and all the places where I'm not allowed to be, just so I'll know."

But what Jesus declares to us with this simple act of multiplying loaves and fishes, this simple act of making the profane event of feeding our bodies a holy and divine event is that God is everywhere. There are no spiritual places and non-spiritual places. There are no God places and non-God places. They are all spiritual places. They are all God places. In Galatians, Paul says that God exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. In heaven, on earth, and under the earth. There are no non-God spaces, there are no non-God places.

I think there comes a time in everyone's life, that is, at least if you are not a completely shallow person, there comes a time in your life when you realize something about your life. It may happen to you when you're in your teens, it may happen in your twenties, it may happen in your thirties or forties or even as late as your seventies. But at some point there comes a time in your life when you realize that just cannot go on living unless you're going to be a person of integrity. And part of what that means is that you cannot go on living unless you're going to be the same person in the locker room as you are in Sunday school, the same person when you're out with the boys or the girls on a Saturday night as you are in the pews on Sunday morning. The same person over the internet where so many people say such vile and abusive things as you are when you talk to your own children or grandchildren. I think there comes a time in every decent person's life when you realize that living your life in such a way in which people always have to wonder what kind of person you really are deep down, where people always have to wonder if they are getting the real you or there is someone else, well, you realize that's no way to live.

I think there comes a time in every decent person's life when they discover this, but when Christians make this discovery, it is the discovery that there is no place in their lives where God should not be. They may not always articulate their discovery that way, but make no mistake that that's what they're discovering. Above 8000 meters, on level ground, 10,000 leagues under the sea. In heaven on earth and under the earth, they are all God places. They are all places to practice the presence of God.