

Sunday, November 7, 2004
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

A FISH STORY

Text:
Luke 20:27-38

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Not so long ago, that adage was a slogan for all sorts of mission and social justice projects. It seems to have fallen out of use, but most of us remember it. Earlier this week, a friend sent me a quote that goes like this: “Give a man a fish, and he’ll ask for lemon; teach a man to fish and he’ll leave work early on Friday.” Hang onto those two different approaches to the matter of fish and feeding for a few minutes, because they are directly connected to our lesson this morning: Luke’s Account of Jesus’ conversation with the Sadducees.

Many people gave Jesus a hard time during the years of his ministry, often asking trick questions or trying to lead him into saying something which they could use against him. Here, the Sadducees, one of the parties of which the Jewish leadership was made up in Jesus’ day, set out to challenge him on a point of the Mosaic law which were the statutes and customs which regulated Jewish life. If a man died and he and his wife had had no children, it was the duty of the man’s brother to marry the widow; whatever children they might then have would be considered children of the deceased first husband. Imagine, they asked Jesus, a situation in which seven brothers marry the same woman following this law of Moses. Now, if there really is a life after this earthly one, and assuming that the woman and her seven husbands entered into that life, which one of them would be her real husband?

Jesus’ answer was typical of him: he refused to be drawn into affirming or denying points of law and doctrine; and, most important, he reframed the

question. He turned everything upside down and looked at the matter not from a human perspective, but from God's perspective: "Now [God] is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive." In talking about the relationship between God and people, in other words, everything that seems so terribly important to us turns out to be irrelevant: all our questions and anxieties and debates about this world and the next world, all our ponderings about time and eternity, all our curiosity concerning the mysteries upon which both existence and intellect are founded. All the energy we spend on what seem to us to be life's great questions is wasted energy. The old and predictable ways of looking at things are not enough.

And this brings us back to my friend's twisted take on the old saw about teaching a man to fish. A high-minded principle of charity and service becomes a wry observation about ordinary, everyday human life. Give me lemon with that, please; and I won't be in the office after, say, noon next Friday. And it's funny; all of us chuckled when I spoke it a couple of paragraphs ago in this sermon.

The point is that there is always more than one way to look at something, and that the familiar way is never the only way. In matters of faith, of religious belief and perspective, the familiar way is not even the best way. Whoever came up with the humorous twist on the old adage was able to look at a thing in a new way, from another angle, and in doing so open up the world a bit. And that is precisely our task as people of faith: to seek more than the familiar, to get beneath and beyond the surfaces of things to where the real meanings, the real importance, lie. There is no better way to do this task, to exercise our spiritual muscles, than by sharing in Communion together. Bread; a cup.

People have been puzzling and arguing about these simple things for centuries: what does it mean that Jesus said, "This is my body... this is my blood"? Do bread and wine become in literal fact Jesus' flesh and blood as they do, for instance in the traditional understanding of the Roman Catholic Mass? Are they simply what they are every day, bread and cup, which serve us as reminders of what Jesus did and said at the Last Supper? Or is the meaning to be

found in the vast and vague territory in between the miraculous and the ordinary? If we do what Jesus asks us to do, to exercise our imaginations and try to see things from God's perspective, what matters is quite simply that no matter what, there is meaning here. The ordinary becomes more than the ordinary; the world then opens up, and we catch a glimpse of the truth: past, present and future are all part of the fabric of God's reality. Communion is a meal. Communion is a miracle. Communion is a memory, Communion is a foretaste of the party which Jesus tells us heaven is like. Communion takes us back to sit with the disciples in the Upper Room. Communion takes us forward to that unimaginable time when Jesus will come again, and time itself will be remade into something of which we cannot yet conceive. Forget the theological fine points, forget all the things that other people call mere superstition, forget everything anyone else has ever told you that Christianity is or is not supposed to be. Just take the words: "This is my body... this is my blood". Say them, listen to them, and then let God go to work on your heart and on your imagination. Laugh, cry, shake your head, explore the promptings of your inner self where you and God meet, or sit in stunned puzzlement: it's all right. It's what we're supposed to do. Do what Jesus told the Sadducees to do: stop messing around, and let God get to work in your heart and in your head.

Jesus said to the Sadducees, "Stop trying to trip me up, stop niggling about points of law, and turn your imaginations loose. Imagine that there's a reason for that law of Moses that isn't a law at all but a token, a reminder, of God's love and God's purposes for us and for the world."

Let's bring this down to the immediate and to the issues of the moment. Some of us who come to this Table this morning are more than glad that the election turned out just the way it did. "This is my body... this is my blood." How will you now translate the campaign rhetoric of peace and equity and justice and community into reality? How, in Jesus' name, will you hold political leadership to account for promises made? How will you come to terms with the shortcomings which you know affect and afflict your successful candidates and their plans for our future? How will you put your Christian imagination and

your spiritual muscle to work? How will you keep the Christian faith a reason for responsible public behavior and not an excuse for smugness?

For those who now must live with loss: how will you do likewise? How will you keep faith with a vision of the future which will not come about in any immediate tomorrow? How will you exercise your Christian imagination and your spiritual muscle in the months and indeed years to come? How will you keep imagining a future which truly matters to you?

The question for us all is how we go about being faithful Christians: even as we may disagree, we are called to a life in which our faith shapes our politics and not the other way about. That's neither a conservative nor a liberal observation: it is a statement of Christian principle. In order to have that happen, we must help one another see things as God sees things. And it's not as if we had no idea how God sees things. The model is right here at our Communion table where ordinary things become extraordinary, where we encounter the vivid presence of Jesus in the familiar rituals of our worship and the familiar surroundings of this sanctuary.

Now here come the things that makes us twitch, that make us uncomfortable. It's not just how we try to see things from God's perspective, it's as we help each other to do so. Imagine asking someone after worship this morning, "How was Communion for you?" or, "Can we talk for a bit about how we felt this morning? I could do with the chance to think things through a bit." Yes, how we deal with matters of faith on our own is important; but how about how we grow and mature as a church, as a community of faith? We can't do that in silence. I dare you: talk to each other!

"My that was a good sermon!" encounters "You know, Peter just didn't seem to hit the target this morning" -- and the world breaks open just a bit. We don't accept the way things are, but we go adventuring together. So go ahead and have roast preacher for lunch. Please trust me: it's good for you! An old adage about fishing that still means something changes into a joke, then

seriousness and humor walk hand in hand for a while. The world is alive with possibility. A fish story isn't a self-serving fabrication – you should have seen the one that got away! A fish story is about taking care of the world and about finding funny things to say along the way. It is, therefore, about faithfulness; and we cannot be faithful all by ourselves. Communion and community are words that mean almost the same thing. Take that thought from the Table out into the world: neither you nor the world will be the same.

Thanks be to God.