

Get Real! Oct 7, 07

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; John 6: 25-35

- The people of Israel have been rescued from slavery in Egypt, and they are still wandering in the wilderness. Moses is preparing them for the time when they will enter the promised land.
 - In the wilderness they are being fed daily with a mysterious food called manna- that appears every morning, like flakes of bread from the sky- the word manna means “what is it? It’s a mystery.
 - When they get to the promised land of course they will be able to grow their own food; so Moses gives them a commandment concerning the food that they will grow-
 - This is a thanksgiving reading but there is no mention of giving thanks- I wonder why?
 - Let us hear the word of God according to Deuteronomy 26: 1-11.
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- Today’s reading from John’s gospel is also concerned with food. Jesus has just mysteriously fed thousands of people with just a few loaves and fish, and then he withdraws from the crowds.
 - But they follow him. Ostensibly to get more bread, to see more miracles. To see if Jesus can be one up on Moses.
 - But Jesus sees more deeply into their hearts as to what they truly need.
 - Again, this is a reading for thanksgiving, but no mention of giving thanks- I wonder why?
 - Let us listen for God’s Word to us today according to the gospel of John: 6: 25-35

SERMON

Some time ago I saw a wonderful production by a seniors theater group – called ACT 2- designed for high school students- if anyone here works in the school system, I’d thoroughly recommend it.

Part of the format of the production is a kind of question answer session where the interviewer asks the seniors questions about their lives: who is married, divorced, single, living with a partner; who has children; and so on and their early lives.

And the questions dig deeper -Who has ever stolen something? (one, a retired chaplain, confessed that as a child he had stolen off the offering plate); who has done drugs? Who has been arrested? And so on.

There's fun, there's laughter, but bit by bit they reveal quite intimate and painful details of their lives. One man remembers how he just couldn't please his father; a woman remembers how her mother told her that she had never wanted her; another remembers alcoholic parents, fear, abuse.

And then there are all the stories of love and loss and betrayal and failure. Personally, I ran out of Kleenex. But it was not only sad and moving, it was also very encouraging— because here were a bunch of people who, despite the odds, had nevertheless “made their way in life.”

At one performance apparently a teenager commented, “This is the first time I've been in a place where grown ups tell the truth”

It IS cathartic to have people simply tell the truth. To tell it as it is. To be real. People today are hungry for truth, hungry for real. We want authentic. We want the inside and the outside to be the same- no pretense, no whitewashing.

The most popular TV shows are so called Reality TV. Real people, real challenges, real goof ups. The most popular movies are graphic movies. Real violence, real sex. Don't obscure or hint at anything.

We want real. The buzz -word in politics is “transparency”. Tell us what is REALLY going on. We have a right to know the truth.

In today's scripture reading Jesus tells the people, don't look for more bread that will only leave you hungry tomorrow, look for the real bread, the true bread, the bread that lasts.

YES, they say, GIVE us this bread! That's why we're here – that's what we want – give us the real bread, Jesus.

But Jesus response is jarring: he says- that's me, I'm it. I'm the true bread from heaven. I'm the bread that is real. Come to me and you will never be hungry. Believe in me and you will never thirst.

It was jarring then and it's jarring now- Jesus' words jar our ordinary sense of what is real.

And we've developed this strange RITUAL around Jesus as the true bread, our communion ritual- sometimes it's called the Eucharist- the Greek word for Thanksgiving- -and the ritual IS JARRING- -

Isn't it weird- to take a teeny, weeny bit of bread dipped in grape juice- and be told, "this is the bread of life given for you". I mean get real. Get real!

The ritual of communion jars our sense of reality. Perhaps that's why we're commanded to do this- to open ourselves to another reality, a deeper reality. This IS why we use rituals.

Long, long ago, our spiritual ancestors, in the passage we read from Deuteronomy, are commanded to perform a strange ritual, every growing season.

When they come into the land, and they first see crops appearing, they are not to follow their natural instincts. They're not to take a grape and pop it into their mouths, even though their mouths may be watering. They're not to pick their fresh vegetables and put them in a pot and make a feast

No-they're to have a basket on hand, and to deliberately set those first fruits aside in that basket.

Then they're to take the basket to the altar of the Lord, wherever that may be, and they are to lay it down at that altar, and to recite words, a litany- that tells the history of their people,

"A wandering Aramean was my father,and we, his children became slaves in Egypt,.....but God rescued us and brought us to this land-....amen "

What do they do with the offering? Is it left there at the altar? No, they're to take it up again, and to throw a party with it- and to include all those who are not fortunate enough to be able to grow food, because they don't have land—like aliens, strangers, nomads in their midst.

Or Levites. Levites are the tribe who don't have land, because they're set aside to tend the temple, - they're supposed to be supported by the other 11 tribes, each tribe to give them a tenth of what they produce.

So, they're to throw a party and share what they have with those who don't have.

Why does Moses give the people this elaborate ritual? Why not just tell them that when they come into the land, they're to say "thanks God" and be generous to others?

Wouldn't that be straightforward, authentic, real, instead of creating a whole mumbo jumbo? What is the point of the " ritual." The basket, the words, the laying down at the altar, the taking up from the altar, the feast. What's the point?

Basically we're given rituals because we're human - we're prone to forget. Rituals are living reminders, concrete actions, signs, that help us hold onto what is important, what is really real.

Try to imagine what it may have been like for the people of Israel -to spend 40 years wandering in the wilderness, a whole generation, never planted, never grew their own food.

Imagine the anxiety - - where would tomorrow's bread come from?- would this mysterious manna be there again tomorrow? What if it's not? What if God doesn't come through tomorrow?

A generation of people, little by little, day by day, coming to KNOW God's faithfulness, learning to depend on God's provision. What a blessing to learn to do that, to live without fear.....

And how awful it would have been if after that terrible long 40 years they were to lose what they had learned. Now that they are in the land, now they can grow food by the efforts of their own hands, they face a terrible temptation-

One we all face: Will they now try to depend entirely on themselves? Will they forget the faithfulness of God? Will they lose their close relationship? Will they lose the first and most precious gift that they have been given- faith in God. What if they forget?

And so they're given a commandment, not a suggestion, not an option, but a commandment, in the form of a ritual: - set aside your first fruits, take them to the temple, lay them down at the altar, and remember your story. A religious ritual to prompt their memories:

We need ritual because we're human and our memories are short.

Those people who followed Jesus to the other side of the sea, had very short memories. Only the day before, they saw Jesus perform an extraordinary miracle with loaves and fish, and yet already they're saying to him, prove who you are, and tomorrow they'll want proof again.....

Isn't that true for us too? The reality of God that we experience today somehow tomorrow seems to slip away. And we keep asking God for more proof of God' love, more proof that God is real?

We too need rituals to help us remember. Part of the ritual given to the people of Israel IS to remember their STORY and to tell it.

Not the SHORT story, not the one that begins with how they came into the promised land, how they ploughed and planted and worked hard all day so that now the land has born fruit- not the story that tells their children, "now dears, if you work hard, you too can get somewhere and be someone and have property and fine things-"

No, they're to tell the REAL story – the story that goes back to the struggles of the past, back to the time when they were nothing and nobody- nomads, with no name, no land; owning nothing, indeed in the end owned by others, slaves- in someone else's land.

They're to tell the REAL story, that reminds them that even though they now have food and comfort, they are no better than people who do not have; they are no better than the weakest, wandering nomadic alien in their midst. They are no better or more deserving than people who don't have property.

They are to remember, and to tell the story of GOD'S, power and God's grace, in case in their humanity and frailty they should get confused -now that they have come into the land, - confused about what is and isn't real.

In case they start to imagine that the food that they're producing is actually their own, rather than a sacred trust. In case they start to imagine that their purpose is to PRODUCE more, and to get lots of stuff and to be secure.

We need that reminder too. Our ritual of Thanksgiving today reminds us that all we have belongs to God, and we are simply stewards in God's world.

Just as our ritual of COMMUNION reminds us reminds us that there is a mystery beyond what we see – that in Jesus, the bread of life, we have everything we need. That in communion we are invited to God's feast for the poor; we're invited to partake of God's first fruit of the new creation.

And so when we receive communion we tell the story, the real story:

That once we were nobody and nothing, strangers and aliens, wandering in confusion and darkness, timid and afraid. When the time was right, God brought Jesus, and laid him out on the world's altar.

And said to us, “ here I am, here is my love. Here is my desire, my longing for you and for the whole world.”

And then God takes up again what God has laid down, takes up Jesus Christ, the first fruits of the age to come, and throws a party, a feast for the world- a feast of bread and wine - and welcomes everyone who is hungry or thirsty – everyone who hungers for truth, who thirsts for what is real.

Come, God says, lay yourselves down here at the altar, with Jesus, and I will take you up with Jesus, bless you, break you, share you, use you to spread a feast for the hungry of the world.

Perhaps the scripture doesn't speak of thanksgiving because God wants more than a polite “thanks God”. God wants our whole lives, given in trust , so that God may transform and use us to bring what is real to the world.

So come, come to the table with ALL of who you are- with all your pain and doubts and with all your memories of goodness and grace. Come to the feast, to know again the living God, and what God can do in YOUR life- Come, let's get real!

(COMMUNION)