

Proper 13A
Peace, Seattle
August 3, 2014
Isaiah 55:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

GIVING BREAD AWAY

It's such a joy for us to be back with you, our beloved community, after our far-flung adventures!

After a sabbatical that was chalk full of rich and diverse experiences and encounters of every kind, we can say without hesitation: THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME.

What words best describe our journey?

What was our favorite place, our most treasured experience?

Each of us is likely to answer those questions differently; and—the truth is—in some ways, it's too soon to tell.

For like the fisherman from last week's parable, we've cast our net wide, gathering diverse experiences—like fish—of every kind. And now we're sorting through them—and will be for some time to come—holding on to many and letting others go.

While it's too soon to tie it all together, what I can say is this:

Our sabbatical was a many-layered feast replete with highs and lows, sweet spots and challenges, unforgettable people, places and experiences—a true adventure which will remain with us the rest of our lives and which we'll be unpacking for a long time to come. **The pilgrimage continues.**

And you, dear sisters and brothers, we must tell you how grateful we are for your faithful accompaniment in prayer along the way; for the steady leadership of the church council and sabbatical team, the Word and Sacrament ministry provided by Pastor Martha Myers, and the pastoral care provided by the tag team of Pastors Eldon and David.

You need to know that, though we were separated by multiple time zones, you were never far from our hearts! Yes, it's good to be home.

We had the gift of spending 5 days in Paris in early May, and on our last full day there we visited the famous Cathedral of Notre Dame.

Paris is the most visited city in the world, and Notre Dame is the most visited sight in Paris.

There is a constant throng of people walking through the nave of Notre Dame every moment of every day. But as we learned, this great Cathedral of Our Lady came very close to suffering an ignoble death during the years after the French Revolution.

For centuries Notre Dame served as the cathedral church for European royalty, it was the Establishment church, and its identity was indelibly linked with the royals, the church hierarchy, and the aristocracy, and in the centuries leading up to the revolution it had come to symbolize the excesses of all three.

With the success of the revolution, Notre Dame was at risk.

- Religious services were banned,
- it was stripped of all its riches,
- statues were pulled down,

- and masons systematically chiseled off anything that might seem kingly.
- Notre-Dame was converted into a “Temple of Reason” and even became, for a while, a holding pen for cattle.

Because it had become such a negative icon of privilege and excess, there were many who thought it ought to be torn down. For it had strayed far from the fundamental mission of serving all people.

But not everyone thought tearing down Notre Dame was the solution. One man thought that if he could somehow make Parisians fall in love with the great Cathedral again, then it might be saved and its role renewed. So he wrote a story about a deeply flawed human being who found sanctuary and purpose there, and he called it THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME.

That novel by Victor Hugo reset the conversation and calls for tearing the cathedral down became transformed into calls for its restoration.

The afternoon we visited Notre Dame this story was very much present to us. But what became, for me, even more interesting than what went on INSIDE Notre Dame that day, was what was taking place OUTSIDE.

Across the Place du Parvis, the square outside Notre-Dame, near what Parisians call Kilometer Zero, the epicenter of ancient Paris and the location from which all distances in the city are measured, a huge tent as big as a city block was erected, and inside were bread bakers and pastry makes from all over the city.

When we exited the cathedral, we were met by a woman with a basket of baguettes going among the crowd, offering up pieces of freshly cut bread to any and all who would take them. Circled around and around the Place du Parvis, she had a smile on her face and a lilt in her walk as she gave away bread indiscriminately.

I invite you to picture her in your mind, and hold on that image as we move to the gospel...

In today’s gospel, Matthew tells us that when Jesus hears of the death of John the Baptist, he gets in a boat and heads off on a search for solitude. But the folks who’ve heard and seen and been touched by him, aren’t ready to let him go, so they track him from along the shore.

And when he finally comes ashore, there they are, this rag tag assortment of broken, needy people, and Jesus sees them and is filled with compassion for them and begins to heal them.

As the day starts getting late, the disciples start getting nervous—

WHAT, they wonder, ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE GOING TO DO FOR DINNER?!

And so they tell Jesus, YOU OUGHT TO TELL THESE FOLKS IT’S TIME FOR THEM TO GO FIND FOOD FOR THEMSELVES.

But Jesus says: THEY DON’T HAVE TO GO ANYWHERE—YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT.

BUT ALL WE’VE GOT, say the disciples, IS 5 LOAVES AND 2 MEASLY FISH!

BRING THEM TO ME, he says, and blessing and breaking the loaves he gives them to his apprentices and they distribute them to all the people “and all ate and all were filled.”

YOU SEE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WHAT HAPPENED WITH THAT CROWD AND WHAT HAPPENED ON THE PLACE DU PARVIS?

Our vocation as a community in Christ is to be like that young woman outside Notre Dame—giving away bread to anyone and everyone; not waiting for them to come to her, or come to us, but going out beyond these walls, to the epicenter of their lives, and offering them the sacred bread of fellowship, of community, of good news.

The psalmist sings it:

THE EYES OF ALL WAIT UPON YOU, O LORD,
AND YOU GIVE THEM THEIR FOOD IN DUE SEASON,
YOU OPEN WIDE YOUR HANDS
AND SATISFY THE NEEDS OF EVERY LIVING THING, ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA!

And Isaiah shouts it:

HO! ALL WHO THIRST, ALL WHO HUNGER, COME, BUY AND EAT!
COME AND BE SATISFIED! TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD!

Though the crowds and even his own disciples couldn't grasp it just then, it eventually became clear to them that JESUS HIMSELF IS THE BREAD.

JESUS IS THE BREAD and when we take him into ourselves, when we ingest him like our family did on the Place du Parvis that day, when we ingest him as we do every week here at this Table, we become—through the miracle of God's abundance—we become what we have received—we become bread for the world.

And with a smile on our face and a lilt in our step, we leave this feeding station, this gathering, so we can share him, and share ourselves, as food for a hungry world.

LET US PRAY:

Jesus, Bread of Life, our Host and our Meal, ever you call us to be nourished at your Table of abundance; and ever you send us out to be bread for our neighbors and for the world.

Open our eyes, hearts and hands, so that those with whom we share will find their deepest hungers satisfied in you.

Amen.