

LEARNER'S MIND
BE BOUNTIFUL

Texts on Sunday, August 4, 2013

2 Kings 4: 42-44; Luke 9: 10-17

The stories of Elisha are tucked away in a few chapters of 2 Kings, where most Christians never tread. Perhaps we heard them in Sunday school, but since then, they have been locked in a cabinet. Now, suddenly, this dusty old box bursts with a word like one of the best-loved gospel stories, the feeding of the multitudes. Set side by side, this Elisha story and the Jesus story look like twin sisters: the hungry crowd, disciples with only a little something in a grocery bag, the master's command—*Give them food*, the disciples' protest—*How?*, the command repeated . . . and then, food for all.

Meditate with me on this promise, this hope, this possibility of food for all. As ever, we won't worry whether this all happened just so, for here is the heart of the story: Food for all. When there is food for all, when the hungry are filled with good things, then there will be no more war, no more greed, no more racism, no more mean streets, no more mass incarceration, no more border police, no more deportation, no more joblessness, no more fracking the foundations of the earth, no more lousy education, no more lousy housing, no more bankruptcy and death when sickness comes to the uninsured, no more rotting democracy, no more hunger and thirst—when there is food for all. This possibility in the feast of food for all—you have always felt it.

Is this to happen? Or have we misunderstood? Is the story of the feeding of the multitudes to make us see Jesus and bow down, or be Jesus and rise up? Is it a pretty color plate in a child's Bible, with no demand on us, or is it God's command to us, saying *You give them something to eat*? Look, we are totally responsible for how we hear the Word, and we must hope that somehow we are to be held accountable for what we've heard and what we've done, else there lives no God on earth at all. What can we hear?

Take note. Elisha does not and Jesus does not do the miracle. To the learner, both say *You give them what they need*. Now, evil men give orders none can obey. *Make bricks without straw*, shouts Pharaoh to the oppressed. But Love never commands you to do what you are not able to do. *Forgive. Seventy times seven times, forgive. Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you. Return no one evil for evil. Do not try to save your small life, but lose your life for my sake*, says the Lord. All these commands God gives for one purpose, that you learn who you really are, how wonderfully you are made, what bounty awaits there beneath your fear, frailty, and complaint. The commandments of God reveal what our Creator created us to do. Spirit

now, the commandment comes, and it very clear. Do you see the multitude who are hungering? You give them something to eat.

The disciples exclaim, *How?* What an excellent response. The usual response to the need of the multitude sounds like this: *Yeah, right! Food for all while the rich rule? Food for all while those fool parties duke it out over petty politics? Food for all while I have my own family, my own problems to deal with? Food for all? Yeah, right!* But why accept this croaking sound from our miserable throats? The disciple asks rather, *How?* If you love to sing, *Lord, I want to be like Jesus*, then pray for learner's mind, for mind open to a mystery, wanting and waiting to discover your power. *How?*

These Bible stories answer that question by seeking your pulse. They press for it by telling first that everyone ate enough, and second, that there was even some left over. Both stories say that. Elisha's adds, "some left, according to the word of the Lord." Jesus' story adds, "enough to fill twelve baskets." Your ancient parents are sending you a message! Do you feel the pulse? They are saying, What moved God to send manna to the Hebrews in the desert, and all ate, and there was more than enough—that power of God is yours to move you to give food for all. They are saying, What moved the twelve disciples to suddenly see that they themselves must become the longed-for deep union of the twelve tribes scattered to oblivion—that power to become God's body, to have one mind in Christ, is yours to move you to offer food for all.

How?

It begins with a transformation inside you toward radical hospitality. Radical hospitality is a practice. You must pray first that love like that show up right here. You must desire that everyone! is received as Christ here. No harsh word across your lips is acceptable, if God's justice shall move again to nourish all. In your body, you must long to become a temple of the Lord. You and I, we need helpers in our discipleship. And there is no other path to justice. Those who aim for justice without the transformation of love are just grinding the millstones of oppression, now this one, now that. Those who aim for God without justice are just burning straw. But God's chosen hungry hunger beyond the body. They hunger for righteousness. They hunger for truth. They hunger for experience of God, which heals all wounds.

These stories mean that the way of the world can be otherwise than it is. These stories mean that in the power of God we will, in Walter Brueggemann's words, ". . . overcom[e] the great temptation to think that deep choices are no longer available . . . and that present global systems of power and money have closed off all alternatives." (*Testimony to Otherwise*, p. 106) No!

Now, these stories are not a manual for political action. Yet be assured of this. They are a goad and a guide to resistance and justice in society. When we are learning how to become radical hospitality; when we are learning how to become a more-perfect union of the scattered tribes; when we are learning how to feed the multitudes, we will actually see the multitudes as we have not, and will once more engage the powers of heaven to confront the heedless powers of earth, just as Moses did Pharaoh, just as Elijah did Ahab and Elisha Jehu and Jesus the whole empire of Rome. Then we will find the voice of command and demand, sounding like Bayard Rustin before the multitudes at the March on Washington in August, 1963:

“The first demand is that we have effective civil rights legislation, no compromise, no filibuster— and that it include public accommodation, decent housing, integrated education, a fair employment practices commission, and the right to vote. What do you say?”

Then we will learn to have a dream fit for our day, longing no longer for a day when good and evil showed up so black and white, but ready to receive our own word for the need of our own multitudes in our own day, and answer the command, *You give them something to eat!*

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*