

“Send Them Away?”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12 -- 26 July 2009  
Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

People are hungry. There are so many. It seems impossible. Send them away.

They need to eat. We all do, or we die. And they’re looking to us, as if we have the answers, as if we have the resources. But we don’t, and Jesus knows that. He knew it when he tested Philip. “Feed them,” Jesus said. We know how Philip felt: “You’ve got to be kidding.”

It’s all too much, Jesus. It’s all too much, with everything else we’ve got going on. We’re out in the middle of nowhere, and the timing, to say the least, is inconvenient. Bread gets baked in the morning, and that’s when most of it gets bought, and here we are nearing sunset.

Things could get dicey, if we let them stay here too long. It’s getting dark, and everyone’s tired. A person you can reason with, but a pack of people, a crowd, can do wild, unpredictable things, especially when they want something and you don’t give it to them. Send them away.

Then the unthinkable, the unimaginable happened. There was plenty for everybody, and nobody knew quite how. There’s mention of a boy with a basket containing five loaves and two fish, and plenty of subsequent speculation that his generous example inspired others to share of their meager supplies until there was enough to go around. But we don’t really need to explain away all the wonders of Jesus to keep our intellectual integrity. Maybe Jesus just knew something about the creation he helped make that we don’t know, and maybe that was enough to make something out of nothing, or rather enough to make enough out of very little.

It's an important story, because it shows us how limited life can be when we rely upon our own means and how remarkable life can be when Jesus intervenes with his abundance. The story encourages us to resist our fears and to defeat the temptation to send people away when they are hungry, physically or spiritually, when they come to us hoping that we might fill their emptiness. It shows us how Jesus can make things happen, even when there seems to be no way out, even when the sole sustenance is snugly packed inside a little boy's lunch box.

What if we lived our lives this way? It's almost too scary to ponder. Even the disciples, who witnessed with their own eyes and mouths the miraculous feeding of several thousand people, quickly forgot the power Jesus displayed. Shortly after the leftovers had been gathered, they set out in a boat and met rough seas. They were terrified, and more so when they saw Jesus walking toward them on the water. As soon as he entered the boat, they made it to safety on the other side. But both events, again, would soon be forgotten, or if not forgotten, the force of their wonder would fade, and the disciples would be bewildered or frightened, despite the presence of Jesus.

We are so much like our ancestors, so desperately desirous to be faithful yet so prone to forget, to allow the impact of Jesus on our lives to dissipate swiftly. Still, Jesus persists. He keeps showing up and showing the Way, showing how all things are possible through Christ who strengthens us; showing the Ephesians, and us, through the Apostle Paul, the true dimensions of love – a love that exceeds our measure; a love that bursts the boundaries we so foolishly attempt to place upon it; a love that endures despite suffering – a love that makes pain bearable even when love is the source of that pain.

What will we do, when next comes a person, or a crowd of people, who seek out our help? Will we stand inside the chalk lines of our feeble imaginations, unable to break out, not enough room to invite someone in? Will we look only to the practical and the probable, or will we, mindful of Jesus, consider the possible in a frame of reference two sizes too large?

It's already happening, quarter after quarter, as a crew from Hickory Neck cooks a meal and takes it to Grove. It's already happening, month by month, as the pile of groceries in the back of the Narthex stacks up for delivery for FISH. It's already happening, week by week, as two of our parish children harvest vegetables, giving half of the yield to a local food pantry. Actually, with a witness like that, I think we can hardly call them children anymore. It's happening, in quiet ways only a few of us know about, that others will never discover. And that's just what's happening with those who hunger for food.

With those who hunger for God, the disciples of Jesus Christ who make their home at Hickory Neck send out prayer shawls and take Holy Communion and take the time to visit and make calls and write kind notes and pause for a moment of prayer. We invite our friends, neighbors, and co-workers to worship, and when the stranger comes, their status as stranger doesn't last long, unless that's their preference. It thrills me to see how we treat people like Jesus when they walk in here. That's a sign of salvation at work, the fruit of redemption, a sign of the Spirit.

Yet for all we do through Christ, people are hungry. One meal doesn't fill forever. It takes persistence, an unwavering commitment to prepare and share what nourishes body and soul. We cannot do it alone, nor can we do it together, but only with Jesus may we ever hope to take those expansive, veritably limitless dimensions of love described in Ephesians, and use those dimensions as a guide to the architecture of what we consider possible.

It is not that we neglect to do enough. Enough never is. As Jesus said, “The poor will always be with you,” and we could substitute “the hungry” and any number of other words into that sentence. Used by some as an excuse to do nothing, this verse leads us to understand the diligence required from us who are called and chosen, privileged to serve as disciples of a God who consistently champions the underdog and passionately pursues the least, the last, and the lost.

People are hungry. There are so many. It seems impossible. Send them away? No. Not while Jesus abides in us and we in Him. Carry on, brave Christians, and go beyond. Send them away? Never. Amen.