

**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12) – Year B – July 26, 2009**

**2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21**

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Convention and societal norms tell us that when we are in the polite company we should refrain from talking about money, politics and sex. In the presence of His disciples and crowds of people who came to listen to Him teach, Jesus talked plenty about money and our relationship with it. In a rather more indirect fashion, Jesus also spends quite a lot of His time and ministry challenging the political structures, the abuse of power, and worldly ethics. Finally, Scripture offers several passages and pieces of advice about healthy sexual relationships as well. Many of those passages concern fidelity in our relationships as the practical virtue for which we should strive. Keep following second Samuel for more on that topic.

However, this morning we will be talking about both politics and money, so we can safely all assume one of two things: we are either not in polite company; or we are about to explore Jesus' teachings more closely. Let's set the contextual stage for this exciting two-part drama. The first clue in our Gospel reading that we have something highly political to discuss comes from the opening sentence: "Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias." Tiberias was the Emperor Tiberias. The Roman occupying forces dominated the political scene and set the political agenda for all who had to live under Rome's rule. Even though the Israelites had secured a certain amount of religious freedom within Rome's rule, no one who lived in occupied territory was essentially free. The burden of taxation ensured that everyone – Jew and Gentile alike – were slaves of the governing powers. Are our own lives that different? We too are subject to the laws of the government, and the taxes we have to pay. The huge difference being that we at least get to vote. The huge similarity is the seemingly rampant corruption and injustice in the political and social systems we support through our taxes that have traditionally maintained the status quo in favor of whomever we endow with power.

Politically, we have another aspect of the story to consider. Even though the feeding of the five thousand is shared in all four Gospels, only John's Gospel tells us that this miraculous feeding is around the time of the Passover festival. The institution of the Passover festival was, and remains, a celebration and remembrance of the most significant political event in the history of God's people. It is the time when God miraculously preserved the lives of all the Israelites as they were led from bondage and slavery in Egypt to freedom. Through the prophetic voice of Moses, Yahweh demanded of Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD: Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Exodus 8:1). After a lifetime of prayer and worship, Jesus' death is also framed by the Passover festival, and leads all God's children to freedom in Christ. Whatever we may or may not believe, there is no human political power that can thwart God's will for His children.

The second part of the overall context for this passage comes from Jesus' question to Philip. Note that John's words tell us that this is a test for Philip. It is also a test for you and me. Jesus' question is, "**Where** are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" The question is where to buy the bread, not how or with what. Yet Philip's response immediately jumps to money and the economic impossibility of Jesus and twelve poor disciples being able to afford to buy bread for such a crowd of people. At some time in our lives, I think we have all felt the same sting of disappointment jabbing our consciences because we have stood in Philip's shoes and know the overwhelming weight of paralyzing powerlessness in the face of great need. While Philip despairs, his friend Andrew brings a little boy with some food to Jesus. We don't know whether Andrew's effort was a hint that perhaps if a little boy would share his meager lunch, then others in the crowd would do the same, or whether Andrew knew that if anyone could make a meager offering into something really big, it would be Jesus.

Now that we have some political and economic context, the story of the feeding of the five thousand becomes much more interesting. Biblically speaking, eating and drinking are symbols of prosperity. Metaphorically, eating is also a spiritual blessing. By the grace of God's provision, the Israelites ate manna in the wilderness, and were blessed as stewards of the fruitful Promised Land.

Together, we celebrate the foretaste of our heavenly banquet each week in The Great Thanksgiving our Eucharistic feast. Jesus miraculously feeds the huge crowd from just five barley loaves and a couple of small dried fish – a child-size lunch. In those days, when many went hungry, the gift of a full belly leaves the crowd eager to make Jesus their king. The people receive food and see only a new political wonder-worker, a new king to free them from the oppression of Roman rule. In our day, the politicians promise us a tax break, and we vote for them time and time again, because the habits of our hearts and minds are so economically oriented. We have come to believe that a tax break not only means more money, but that more money means freedom. On a grassy hillside in first century Palestine, Jesus slips away from the crowd and goes to pray. These days, all across the country, and throughout the world, Jesus is pushed off the throne of our hearts and replaced by the dollar, the Euro, the ruble, the yen, any currency of choice – all hollow symbols of true freedom.

At couple of years ago, I heard a priest tell this story. Describing his trip to a local aid agency in Africa, he was meeting with the director, when they were interrupted by a local fisherman requesting money for his family. As the man told his story, it became clear that a substantial amount of money was needed, and the priest shared his growing discomfort. He was silently calculating the dollars in his wallet, wondering how much he might be asked to give, against how much he was willing to give. While the priest was still doing mental gymnastics, and even as the weight of his wallet was becoming a burden to him, the agency director bent forward and pulled open a drawer. He took out a battered old can and reached in. Pulling out a wad of money, he didn't bother to count it, but just handed the whole bundle over to the fisherman. The man left with many words of gratitude, and the priest blurted out, "Wow, you just gave him everything you had!" "Sure," said the director, "he needed it for his family, and it wasn't doing any good sitting in my drawer." When it comes to questions of money, how many of us still respond almost instinctively by calculating the economic cost of discipleship. Instead, how about trying something new? How about praying to God with thanks for the opportunity to serve? How about a prayer of discernment asking how best to use our gifts and the gifts of others to fulfill what God has called us to do in His service, to the glory of His name? Would it be so hard to try this for our personal response to individual life events, keeping money in its rightful place as a tool for God's service? What do you think might happen if this was how we responded as a community to the challenges of fulfilling our mission, according to God's will?

We now know that the leadership parallel being drawn by John is between Moses the sheep-herding prophet and Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Moses prays for manna to feed the people in the wilderness, and gives the people God's Law. Jesus dies a politically engineered death that is transformed by God's grace and power, into the gift of our salvation, for all who believe in Him. Jesus, who does not just feed the hungry with bread, but who is the eternal I AM, the Bread of Life for the whole world. Jesus, the One who gives God's children a new commandment that we should love one another, as He has loved us. God incarnate, who does not count the cost of His own obedience, but offers Himself fully into God's hands. In this one story alone, we see how God multiplies our love offerings to benefit many others. The equation is the sum of God's grace and a powerful proof of God's justice in the world. The values in this equation are love, respect, dignity, and equality. Nothing and no one is lost in this solution. The poor and hungry – the marginalized, fragments of society -- are fed and satisfied by Jesus. To show the abundance of God's grace, the disciples are instructed to gather up the leftover pieces of food. All power and riches rest in Christ Jesus our Lord. "By Him, and with Him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty [God], now and for ever" (BCP 268).

Amen.