



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Food And Other Nourishment

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

April 14, 2013

“Feed my sheep.” It’s such a cozy, simple sounding direction from Jesus to Peter. Jesus often used the sheep and shepherd analogy to refer to himself and those who follow him. So it makes sense that he would tell Peter to carry on in that vein. But I think there is quite a bit going on in this story. First of all, you noticed that Jesus asked Peter three times, “Simon Peter, do you love me?” We probably shouldn’t hear that as Jesus being needy. This story was added on to the end of the Gospel of John for a couple of reasons. Firstly, to restore the relationship between Jesus and Peter, who after all, had denied his Lord three times on the night Jesus was arrested. If Peter was going to be accepted as the leader of the Jesus movement, that betrayal had to be fixed. So, in the story, Jesus gives Peter the chance to take back those regretful denials, one “do you love me” for every “I don’t know him.” The dialogue is the handing over of responsibility of the movement to Simon Peter. And in it, Jesus lays out the mission of what would become the church.

Now, what exactly is that mission? He says, “feed my lambs...tend my flock...feed my sheep.” The stories of Jesus’ miraculous feedings echo here. He was clearly concerned with people having enough to eat. It is a justice issue. God means for there to be enough food for all and for people to be able to procure it. In the feeding of the 5000, Jesus made his disciples into the instruments of feeding the people. It is something that the church has always recognized as a core ministry. Soup kitchens, food pantries, community meals have almost always begun in churches.

This week, a brand new study from UConn on food security in Connecticut came out. Most people in our state have dependable access to enough food to live healthy, active lives, and the ability to afford it, but not everyone. Here in Branford, there is a higher than average chance that households will struggle for food, even though we have sufficient and convenient grocery stores and higher than average participation in assistance programs. Here the problem comes down to income which is a very complex issue, certainly bigger than a Sunday sermon. Hunger is right here but there solutions all around. We are blessed to have wonderful organizations in Branford like the Food Pantry and the Community Dining Room to help but the numbers don’t add up. There are a lot more people here who struggle to have enough to eat than are getting help. And Jesus sits there and says, “feed my sheep.”

Sometimes, it’s not about having enough food but having food that is actually good for you. There are places all over the country that are considered “food deserts” – places with little or no access to healthy, fresh food, some are in sparsely populated rural areas but many are in urban settings. When the only food you can get gives you high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes, I don’t think that’s what Jesus had in mind. Luckily, there are solutions and some are nearby. New Haven is doing a marvelous job at getting food to people who need it. Their new Food Action Plan is an exciting document that considers urban farming, new grocery stores, specific outreach for the three existing food deserts, and food education. All of these strategies will contribute to a healthier community in every sense of the word. All is not bleak. Feed my sheep.

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Then we have to remember that Jesus usually taught at several levels at the same time. “Feed my sheep” can mean “give them food” but it can also mean something more. He’s on the record as stating that we do not live by bread alone. Food is not the only thing that nourishes us. The central activity of the early church and Trinity Branford is the Eucharist – the common meal. Community and the sharing of food and fellowship feed us. Eating together is a way of creating connection and friendship. The people who have come to Trinity to eat spaghetti after the last two hurricanes have been nourished by the fact that we invited them to the meal. They left here knowing that the power might still be out but there was a different kind of energy found in belonging to a community in which people care for each other. That’s the philosophy behind Branford Cares – taking care of each other. People have been nourished by helping others have enough to eat. It’s a feeding miracle.

We are supposed to be hungry for the word of God. Jesus was telling Peter to help people know God. I think that’s why you are all here, to continue to learn, to go further and deeper into the greatest mystery. It’s food for the heart and food for the head. Opening ourselves up for the knowledge of God to fill us is satisfying on the spiritual and emotional level. Contemplating what the mystery might mean or how to understand more is stimulating intellectual pursuit. As far as I’m concerned, good conversation is an all you can eat banquet. The sharing of ideas and contemplating the big questions is essential for the health of a faith community and I think, for all of us individually. The challenge of ideas is good for us.

Another way of being fed is cavorting with creation. The spirit soaks up nutrition in nature, walking in the sun, watching the waves, running in the grass, digging in the dirt, planting and harvesting, anxiously awaiting spring, enchanted by fall foliage. Perhaps shoveling snow might be pushing it. We are a part of creation, we belong to creation. The soul is not healthy when there is no contact with the natural world. That’s why having pets is so good for us.

One of the reasons nature is so nourishing for us is that it is beautiful. Human beings have a hunger for beauty. Gardens are a feast for the eye; we are fascinated with beautiful faces; we beautify our homes and yards with things that are pleasing to look at. Art and music stimulate our senses and point us to beauty with B. The images of deep space are awe-inspiring, worthy of praise for the artist. Someone asked me the other day why we were doing our concert next Friday. My answer did not satisfy me. I had said that I wanted to invite more and more people to come through our red doors and experience Trinity Church. Later I realized that simply offering beautiful music in this beautiful setting was reason enough. As people listen to Mozart, Beethoven, Satie and others, we will be doing what Jesus told us to do. We will be feeding his flock. Who knows, it might even whet their appetites to be fed in more ways.

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