

What's In The Box?

There was a family who had fallen on hard times here in town.

The mom, dad and their 5 year old girl were struggling to make ends meet.

In the house was a special wrapping paper and ribbon – very expensive and reserved for a special occasion.

The little girl found herself a box one day, and, putting a gift in it, wrapped it with that pricey paper and gave it to her dad.

When the dad saw what she had used, he was a little put off.

“Why did you use **this** paper?”

“But daddy, I made it just for you!

Open it!” she said.

The box is empty.

He's mad now.

“You've just ruined the expensive paper by wrapping an empty box?!”

“It's not empty daddy....

“Before I closed the box, I put 100 kisses inside, just for you!”

A few years later, tragically, the little girl dies.

And the father, from time to time, opens that box and holds it to his face and feels his little girl's kisses yet again....

I tell you that story because I think it has something in common with today's gospel lesson....the feeding of the 5000, the miracle of the loaves and the fishes.

Did you know that of all the miracle stories in the 4 gospels, the only miracle they all share is this one?

It is a story that had great significance for the early church, who, in the face of persecution and trouble, needed reminders of God's faithfulness.

But it's also a story about how easy it is to get distracted by the pricey wrapping and miss the priceless gift inside.

The crowd gathers.

They are hungry, far from drive-throughs and fast food joints.

They come because of what Jesus is doing for the sick, the lame, the blind.

As evening creeps in, the disciples, looking only at the outside wrapping, are quick to tell Jesus to send everyone on their way, to fend for themselves, since, looking only at the wrapping and completely forgetting the hidden power of God, a power they have repeatedly seen and experienced, why, it seems to be the only prudent thing to do.

Their focus is on what little they have, a couple fish, a few loaves: "nothing" is what we have, they say.

And maybe they also are feeling a little nervous about a crowd of 5000 men who, given hunger and fatigue and a general despair over life, well, maybe things could get ugly.

But Jesus isn't nervous.

"Everyone take a seat," he says, "Relax, take the load off..."

Jesus reminds us not to be fooled by the outside wrapping, but rather to always take a look at what's inside the box, and what's inside is the always present, yet often hidden, power of God — to meet the needs of the people...as Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, gives thanks and shares it.

Some may have thought of the Passover meal, we today may think of the Eucharist — but no matter what anyone's thinking, everyone has enough, so much so that twelve baskets of leftovers are gathered, but once again, now that stomachs are full, everyone gets caught up in the fancy wrapping.

In Luke's version of the story, the response to this great miracle is that the crowd wants to make Jesus king — a desire that sends Jesus leaving the scene in a hurry.

They want to make him king because he filled their bellies, but full bellies is not the main point today.

The abundance of food is more than a meal, it is a sign of the abundance God showers on us each and every day: abundance not only to meet our physical needs, but also that abundance of love and companionship and community and friendship.

Most folks missed that lesson that day.

As one scholar puts it:

“Though the crowd had been witnesses of the sign that Jesus had worked on the loaves and the fishes, they saw no further than food for the body, which perishes in the using. Although they had not only seen and handled that which Jesus gave, but actually fed upon it, they had not, in the deeper and true sense, seen signs.” CH Dodd

Why?

What makes it so hard to see the miracle of our abundance?

Why do we think so often that we have so little?

Why do we hold onto material goods that need to be shared?

Why do we hold back expressions of love and community and forgiveness that need to be freely given?

There are many reasons.

We live in a society that depends on consumption.

The more we have the more we think we need.

And if we try to escape, well, the constant bombardment of radio, TV, magazine, and internet ads make sure we don't get very far.

We are told on a daily basis: “You need more” and “she who dies with the most toys wins.”

But in truth, we are surrounded by abundance.

Abundance that is the fruit of our labor and abundance that is the free gift from God.

Today's gospel lesson calls us to stop and savor the abundance we have.

And as we savor it, to ask, how can this abundance be shared where it is truly lacking?

You and I know there is plenty to eat in this world, but people in Aiea and Alabama and Africa will go to bed hungry tonight.

“Sin” in this context means our interrupting the flow of God's abundance, interfering with its free flow because we fear we might not have enough.

Connected to that fear is our all too American insistence on self-reliance, our worship of the rugged individual.

"Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps," we say.

But that philosophy is not Jesus.

No one on that grassy hillside is asked to explain why she deserves to eat today.

No one is asked to justify his need for a piece of fish.

It is given, by our Lord, and given freely.

Jesus begs us to do the same.

We are called by our Lord to a life of joyful freedom.

We are called to hold this world very lightly in our hands.

When you get right to it, the Christian life isn't about rules and regulations: it's about trust, trust in God's goodness, that alone has the power to free us from obsessive worries over security, control and safety, to exhale with that quiet confidence that where we cannot, God can.

It is in letting go that we find our deepest hopes realized.

I leave you with this story.

On the island of Foa, a small island in Tonga, there was an old man who deeply loved his land.

As he lay dying, he asks his sons to carry him outside and lay him down on the ground of his beloved island.

As he takes his last breath, he grasps some dirt, holding it tightly in his hand, and then he dies, a happy man.

When he arrives at heaven's gate, God greets him in the form of an old woman.

"Welcome," God says, "come into the joys of heaven."

But as the old man starts through the gate, God says: "Please, you must let the soil go."

"No!" says the old man.

"Never!"

Sadly, God goes away, leaving the man at the gate.

Time passes.

God comes to the old man again, this time in the form of an old friend.

They talk, share some kava, until God says: "Alright, come inside now my friend."

As they walk toward the gate, God again asks the old man to let go of the soil, and again, he refuses.

And again, God walks sadly away.

More time passes and God tries again, this time in the form of the man's beloved granddaughter.

"Grandpa, you're so wonderful and we miss you so much; please come inside with me!"

And the old man nods; he is very old now, and as she helps him to his feet and moves toward the gate, the hand that for all those years clutched his beloved earth gives way, and what he has held so tightly for so long falls away, until all of it is gone.

And he enters heaven's gate.

And the first thing he sees is his beloved island.

We so often grasp what we have, only to miss what is really waiting for us in life.

We so often seize on the pricey wrapping, and miss that which is priceless, waiting, hidden inside the box.

It has been said that the Christian life is an experimental life.

There is no code of laws or detailed plan, no "do this and get your reward" standard.

It is Paul who reminds us that "by grace you have been saved through faith....and this is not of your own doing, it is the gift of God..."

This week, experiment with looking inside the box.

This week, experiment with letting go.

This week, pay attention to the abundance in your life.

Perhaps if we release our grip on what we think we need we will find what we have always wanted.

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