

The Rev. Michele H. Morgan  
August 3, 2008  
Proper 12 Year A  
St. John the Baptist Episcopal

Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 14:13-21

*This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.*

One of the things that I have to do each year is to go to clergy conference. It is a gathering of the clergy of the diocese, to get together twice a year and we do things like best practices, worship together, hear what other churches are up to, time with our bishop and things like that. Really the valuable thing for me that we spend time with each other and talk across a lot of lines of the church: metro/greater Minnesota, small/large church, liberal/conservative etc. We have different hurdles as priests but oftentimes I find that our core differences are not all that different. We all want to bring God deeper into the lives of our congregations, preach, teach, pastor, be good stewards, and love each other as Christ would have us do.

I usually am not surprised at the conversation at the lunch table but I was taken aback as Ann (she is at a little church in southern Minnesota) looked me in the eye and with no malice at all asked me, "Why do you stay in the church?" I am always a great one for jumping in and answering the question that I think that they are asking but for some unknown reason, perhaps because I wanted to say what the heck....(or something mild like that) I paused and asked.... "What do you mean?"

She said, "Well there is so much conversation about homosexuals in the church and how unwelcomed they all are and how that must make them feel, I wonder how do you stay?"

Before I tell you what I said to her I want to acknowledge that I have been thinking about this conversation because of what has been going on at the Lambeth conference and how Bishop Gene Robinson, who has been chosen by the people of New Hampshire and happens to be a gay man, has been excluded from the conference. I have been thinking about how he has been asked by the Bishop of Sudan to resign his Episcopate, and how the Bishop of Fort Worth announced that no one wanted any of the 43 Bishops who consecrated Bishop Robinson at the conference.

These comments were in the media and whenever that happens I have to put my stakes back in the ground with my gay friends who wonder why I stay in the church. I used to try and explain that it is not my experience in the church but I have come to understand that it is my experience as well.

You see, for me there was so much otherness in those questions and comments. So much of ‘who should be here’ and ‘who should not be here’. What our international church is dealing with is an echo of my life, too. The difference with the question put to me is that it is a desire to understand what it might be like for me, as an ordained priest who happens to be a part of the LGBT community, to be in the church. I believe for Anne there was a desire to understand and in that understanding we are then able to reach a common ground.

So I was thoughtful in my answer to her question, “I hear all the talk of the role of homosexuals in the church as a sharp piece of glass that I hold in the palm of my hand. It has no extra-ordinary properties; it is just a piece of glass. It is jagged and if I do not hold it just so, lightly, and with gentleness, it will cut me. I cannot close my hand on it like a martyr cutting myself at every moment, because I do not have to. I can hold it lightly because it is not of my own making or my desire to hold.

I hold on to the shard because I have to; there are voices in the church that will not let me put it down. I know that they cannot keep it in my hand without cutting themselves. It is like pressing a quarter into the hand of a clerk. I would drop that shard in a second if I could and on the occasions that I have, they pick it up, cutting themselves as they set it back in my hand.”

I do not believe that they are hurting me without hurting themselves more. I am annoyed and frustrated by holding this piece of glass not because I have to be careful but because I am deeply saddened that others who are so desperate for me and for other who are LGBT just to go away. It is their wound and their woundedness that has become my wound.

And I believe that we all have that kind of brokenness that at times has prevented us from being fully present to the community. For some of us it is blindness to the fact that we prevent others from being in community, for some it is judgment that we are not like those people but all of us do some form of keeping and blocking others from fully being here.

It is this hurt that I try and keep my eye on. It is one of the things that keeps me in community with people who I know want me to go away. It is an interesting tension and I have been pondering what community means to us as we hear the gospel of Jesus feeding the 5,000 men *and* women and children besides. I am in an inclusive mood: let’s call it ‘the feeding of the 20,000’. (I know it’s a radical notion of women and children being people.)

So here is the teacher doing what he has been doing for weeks without stopping: teaching, preaching, healing, and loving the people before him. Jesus knows that these people are his community, and in that community that has gathered and re-gathered after he left to get some down time, and then reappeared, Jesus has compassion and instead of heeding his disciples to send them away he feeds them.

It is an act of community that we always recognize. My Dad often brought someone home unexpectedly from work: a colleague, a guy hitchhiking that Dad picked up, and he brought them home to feed and let sleep in my brother’s room. Mom would give dad a look and get another plate and as the youngest I would be asked to shift to eat on the corner of the table tucked up

against my mom. All of my siblings shifted a little bit and gave of their portion which was never our first choice.

So we all get that notion of feeding as community, but in the ancient world, in a Jewish world, people did not view it this way. There was a deep belief that you were what you ate, and it was not a principal of good dieting. No, this was not about nutrition it was about purity. You had to put religiously clean things into your body and in doing so you then remained pure. Not only that, but you did not put anything impure in your body and hang out with religiously impure people. Those people on the hillside, well you did not know who they were and how clean they were. My mom's comment to my dad about him bringing home 'the great un-washed' takes on new meaning in the light of this gospel.

The miracle was not that they had enough food to feed the 20,000 gathered there. The miracle was that they allowed themselves to eat, and to be in that community. The miracle was that their love of Jesus was big enough to put aside their profound differences and allow them to be there with one another in community, and in communion with each other. That is the miracle.

The draw of being near Jesus brought them together and their otherness was set aside for that meal,

their differences were set aside for that meal

their brokenness

there mistrust

their fears,

their piety

their otherness, they were all set aside and that was the miracle that we are called to live into. We are called to model and to emulate that in the way we are called to reach out to the other. And we are asked to move in love and know that Jesus wants us all here and we are called to work towards that goal. Setting aside all of our woundedness, and difference, brokenness, mistrust, fear, we to come into community.

As for being 'other' in the church, on some level I have been a marginal player. I get asked about it by people in conversations both in and out of the church. I certainly do not have to talk about it in a public fashion; that seems to be Bishop Robinson's job in this lifetime and recently he said this, "I was also asked by several people whether or not my own witness, and that of other gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, had been "worth it," and "effective." If I've learned anything over the last five years, it is that I am not responsible for how my words and actions are received and whether or not they make a difference. I can only be responsible for (and judge myself by) the faithfulness with which I make my witness to the love of God working in my own life." And knowing that this is true, that is why I stay in the church.

For myself, I would add this: I bring all of myself before my ministry, my church and my God. It is all that I have: my woundedness, my joy, my bruises, my belief, my need, my gifts, my humanness, my otherness and my sameness. It is what God expects of me and what God expects of all of us and we need to be open to what the other brings and accept it. Eating together, shifting over into discomfort, so that others may join in.

I know it will happen for us, for our church and it is as Gene says because, "I am not an optimist - - because being an optimist seems to me to be putting our faith in the works of humankind. The evidence is that we're not doing a very good job of it. But being a person of HOPE, means we put our faith in the love of God, and GOD'S ability to bring this to its rightful conclusion, in God's own time."

And for that I say, Thanks be to God. **Amen.**