

Hunger Is Here – Year A
“We are hungry” /Mike Mattson, Andrea Knepper, Kevin Goodman
All Saints’ Chicago 9/21/2008
Isaiah 55:1-3(a); Psalm 145; 1 John 4:7-18; Matthew 25:35-40

The Rev. Kevin Goodman:

Nearly sixteen years ago, in this sacred space, parishioners and volunteers, gathered together. They collected groceries, filled bags, then opened those very doors, to the homeless and hungry neighbors, of Uptown and Ravenswood.

A call was issued. A call similar to the one we heard from the prophet Isaiah this morning.

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat.”

This morning Mike Mattson and Andrea Knepper, share with us the hunger relief work of this place. They invite us to walk through the doors, to come to the table, to be with those who are hungry, and somewhere in the midst of all this, both discover, how hungry they were in the midst of ministry.

Mike Mattson:

When I told a long-time friend and business colleague of mine (who also happens to have been ordained a Presbyterian minister) that I would be preaching today, his response was, “When I first met you, you wouldn’t even set foot in a church, and now you are preaching!” I’m not someone who easily talks about his faith in public, so the only way I would be up here today is if the subject were something I was passionate about. It is!

Of today’s readings, the one that really resonates with me is from the First Epistle of John, in particular:

“... since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us.”

I grew up in a white, middle class, suburban Presbyterian church. I didn’t have a bad experience there; but I never understood why my family and I spent an hour or two each week listening to Bible verses and “boring” sermons. I could be doing something far more meaningful, like watching reruns of “Flash Gordon” on TV. My mother did a lot of preaching at dinner (especially after an extra cocktail or two and always accompanied with a lot of finger waving), so, I figured I got more than enough church at home.

My wife Helen, my son James and I moved about a block from the Church 17 years ago. At the time we did not attend any church. In fact, at the time, I expected my presence would never grace a house of worship except for a wedding or funeral. Helen, a latent English teacher, was concerned that our son would grow up without an understanding of commonly-used Biblical r

references, such as “the patience of Job;” so she sent James to Sunday school, but felt, sheepishly, she’d have to go to church, too. I wasn’t excited about subjecting our son to this, but, since she didn’t require that I go, I figured I could live with it.

Around this time, I was becoming somewhat restless. I was working really hard and enjoyed being a husband and father, but, I felt I needed something more. I couldn’t be having a mid-life crisis, I was too young! Helen told me that some folks from All Saints’ were serving lunch to hungry people at Pilgrim Lutheran Church every eighth Saturday; maybe this could be an interesting thing for me to do. I would feed the hungry!

The truth was I didn’t know the first thing about feeding “hungry” people. I had seen lots of people on the streets, even in my own neighborhood, asking for money or food, but I didn’t know the first thing about them, or their needs. I’m not sure I really wanted to know anything about them. I think I was scared. Helping people who were hungry and most likely poor was outside of my comfort zone. This was about 14 years ago, long before our current Tuesday night food pantry and soup kitchen. For me, it was the beginning of a long and wonderful spiritual journey.

After helping ad hoc for several Saturdays at Pilgrim, I became regular volunteer. Although I really enjoyed being with the All Saints’ volunteers, I was initially wary. After all, these were “church” people, and I was still adamant I would never set foot in a church. We did serve lunch in the school cafeteria, not in the “church” part. But, no one from All Saints, was trying to convert me. Even Bonnie, the new priest, didn’t appear overly “preachy”; she seemed to respect my lack of church-going habits. What really struck me was how truly compassionate the people from All Saints’ were. They were living out their faith on a day other than Sunday, and they were doing it without wearing it on their sleeves.

Along with the Saturday lunch at Pilgrim, All Saints’ volunteers were giving out grocery bags from the front of the Church. I was so moved by what I was experiencing every eighth Saturday that I began to help here, too. Initially, we gave out whatever food people had left in the vestibule of the Church along with loaves of bread that we bought. There was always bread! We probably had one of the most gourmet pantries in Chicago; with donations of things like dried morels, white asparagus tips, mussels in a wine sauce, etc. I loved that we used the pews as our temporary shelves. It made me feel like this church was truly a holy place. I realized, despite all of my resistance, I was in church. I started showing up on Sundays, too.

We gave out up to 100 bags each week; it seemed like such a large number! Usually there were only four or five items in each bag; but the people who lined up were still appreciative. And this shabby-looking church was really making a difference in the lives of its neighbors. I was less restless! Even having been away from a church for close to 25 years, I knew this was how Christians were supposed to be! And, much to my surprise, I did what I thought I would never do: I became a confirmed and pledging member of All Saints’.

About 10 years ago, we began inviting the people waiting for groceries into the parish hall for coffee or tea, rather than making them stay outside in the cold or rain. Within a year, this grew into providing a full dinner, as we do today. This invitation was much more than just a

welcoming gesture or a call to escape the elements. It was the start of Sharing with our neighbors, rather than giving food to the hungry; the difference being a two-way relationship rather than a one-way action. For me, it was another key point in my faith journey. As I spent time talking with our neighbors, it began to dawn on me how very similar I was to them, rather than how different they were from me.

Up until this point in time, I had been focused on giving something worthwhile to those less fortunate than me. It had been important to me that I give as much as I could - and it still is. But, it wasn't until we began inviting people into the parish hall and I spent more time getting to know them that I realized how much I was getting. I hadn't gone into these ministries expecting to get something back; after all, I was supposed to be doing the giving. I began to see that not only was God living within our volunteers and neighbors, but God was living within me, and God's love was being perfected as all of us grew to share so much with one another.

I have received so much from our neighbors! I have spent countless hours discussing the meaning of life with Earl; learning a lot in the process. Laurie introduced me to her family. Wilhelm gave Helen a figurine from his “alley” collection. Jerry taught my son a piano tune, which they played together one Tuesday night. Beverly shared a poem she wrote. Many times, as people leave that parish hall on Tuesdays, they thank me. It is I who should thank them! (and, sometimes, I do)

I realize I was one of the hungry ones 14 years ago; yet I didn't know it until I started feeding others. I had tried to ignore God, but God didn't ignore me. God knew I was hungry and God fed me, and fed me in a way I couldn't resist. Throughout this journey, I have come to realize that God has never given up on me, just as God has never given up on anyone here and anyone who shows up on Tuesday nights. We are all very much alike; there is no “us” and “them,” there is just “us.” We are all hungry. We all need and all deserve to be fed.

While I can't say that I've ever seen God, through my experiences here, at All Saints', I have come to believe that God's spark lives within each of us and can be perfected in us, if we, eventually, open ourselves to it.

Andrea Knepper:

I believe that things happen around tables... I love dinner parties – the hospitality, the welcoming of friends, people gathered, good food, good wine, talking into the night... There's something magical; something wonderful. --Something sacred, I think.

The last time I was in New Orleans, several different St Luke's parishioners whose homes we'd worked on on previous trips invited us into their homes again -- this time around their dinner tables. Gillian and her family fed us crawfish – and taught us how to eat them – around their dinner table in the same kitchen we had dry-walled a year before. They extended warm hospitality, inviting us to break bread with them around their tables. We encountered God together.

In college, I joined the Episcopal Church. I grew up Methodist, and had no idea what the Episcopalians were doing – with their robes, and processing, and crossing themselves... But they had Eucharist every week -- and I went every week. I still come every week. Because I love the table. I love the hospitality. I love that every week we break bread together around the table, and encounter God.

My childhood dinner table was also a place of warm hospitality. It was a small table, in a small, small kitchen. If we needed something out of the refrigerator after a meal started, I was the one to get it, -- because unless I got up and pushed in my chair, there wasn't room to open the refrigerator door. And my sister – she sat boxed in by the stove on her right, the table in front of her, the wall behind her, and the refrigerator to her left. Once she sat down, she couldn't get up again until the meal was over. We once fit 11 people around that table for Thanksgiving. We put plywood planks on the table and covered it with a tablecloth. It was beautiful. We all had to be very polite, though, because if you put your elbows on the table, your whole side of the table would tilt, and you'd have to catch the food before it slid into your lap.

I learned social justice around that childhood dinner table. My mother and her partner chaired the two national activist Methodist organizations that worked on progressive issues in the church - - sexism, racism, homophobia. I heard policy analyzed and polity planned; demonstrations planned and debriefed; strategies set for regional and national conferences. I learned that part of a Christian faith is to stand steadfastly for and with oppressed and marginalized people in our world. I was – and am – passionate about social justice.

Ten years ago I got really excited when All Saints' started inviting our food pantry guests into our Parish Hall to sit down. It felt like social justice lived out with real people in the real world around us. But the first night that people came in and sat, it was really awkward for me. There were maybe 25 people in the parish hall. We had four tables set up. We made hot chocolate. We had some sort of pretty gross snack.

And I chattered non-stop all night. Chattered to fill the silences. --Chattered non-stop because I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to talk about with these homeless people but I wanted to be welcoming and hospitable. And then Earl did something really nice. Some of you may remember Earl. He talks an awful lot. He's had some horrific experiences. He's VERY opinionated and has no qualms about sharing his opinions. Extensively. And he has a really big heart.

One of the guys sitting at the tables asked me if we had any gloves that we could give him. It was a cold, cold night – it was January and tens of degrees below zero. He was on the streets, and he had no gloves. I said no. I didn't have any. The fact is, I had a pair in my coat pocket. I didn't want to give them away -- they were the only ones I had. Then Earl took the gloves he was wearing off of his hands and gave them to the guy who was asking for gloves. The guy tried to refuse them – after all, Earl was the wrong person to be offering something... But Earl insisted, explaining that HE could afford to get another pair. I was embarrassed -- and ashamed - - that the homeless guy would give away his own gloves, and I wouldn't. I was the one who was supposed to be offering something. I was supposed to feed the hungry. Isn't that what social justice is? But Earl clothed the naked when I refused.

Several years later, after a break of a few years, I started going back to the food pantry. This time I didn't volunteer. -- Initially I went for the church service beforehand, and then started staying for dinner. I eat at the same table every week, with pretty much the same people. Green Bay” always wears a Packers shirt, and the other folks at the table always give him a hard time about it. Gino loves the fact that his hair is longer and thicker than mine – and he loves the fact that I'm insanely jealous of that. Angel loves to listen to Rico sing, and thinks that Rico should be on American Idol. I love to listen to Rico talk about music. He cries when he tells me about the songs he loves most. Lynette comes to church with me, and we stick together cuz we're the only women at the table. Sometimes we fuss about men. She's been heart-broken recently, because her son moved to Iowa for a job. –And exasperated because he keeps calling her wanting her to solve the minor glitches in his life.

It's been awkward, getting to know this table of mine. Imagine my consternation the first time that the guys at my table decided that none of them could serve themselves until I served myself first! Every week -- “Ladies first.” I gave up trying to argue with them. Some arguments you just can't win. I think that it was awkward because it changed the balance of power between us. I was no longer the one with something to offer -- or with something to refuse to offer – and my table mates no longer the ones who needed something. Now they had something to offer as well. And not just to each other, but to me. The guy who started that trend – the “Ladies first” one – is a really interesting guy. Joe is in his mid-40's. He grew up in the projects -- the Lathrop Homes at Diversey and Leavitt. He never learned to read as well as he'd now like to, and he's using the Bible to try to learn. He has struggled with addiction, mental illness and a violent temper since before he was a teenager. Every now and then he gets asked to leave on Tuesday night because of his behavior. He has a hard time being around people. About a year ago he left a rented room that he had in order to go live under a bridge because he couldn't figure out how to deal appropriately with the people in his building. He decided he was going to stay out of trouble better under the bridge instead of near the folks in his building. He comes to pantry, though, because he's lonely. And because, he says, it helps him to “act right.”

I've become very fond of Joe. I've helped him with his reading. I gave him a Bible to help him out with that. And hopefully to help him remember through the week that he's not alone. That there are people who care how he's doing. People who care about him. It feels good to do this for him. About a month ago, my father was diagnosed with cancer. The day after I got the news, I was at Food Pantry. In the church after the service, Joe said to me, “Are you sick? You look tired.” I thought about whether or not to tell him my father was sick – and then said to him “my father called me last night to say he has cancer.” Joe said that he was really sorry, and that he would pray for me. I thought about it again, and asked if he would pray for my father as well. Joe said yes. Then he said, “better yet, let's pray together.” (oh, boy!) “OK. That would be nice.” “You lead, cuz I'm not very good at this.” “I'm not very good at this either, Joe.” Then, standing right by the doors to the reading room, Joe took both of my hands in his. He started saying the Lord's Prayer. Now, Joe never remembers my name. --He calls me “Perty.” After we finished the Lord's Prayer, Joe said, “God, please take care of Perty's dad.”

“Please take care of Perty's dad.”

"when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

We are all the least of these, and I have been fed by homeless, hungry people. I love my table. I love the hospitality we offer each other. I still go every week. Because I love that every week we break bread around that table, and encounter God together.

The Rev. Kevin Goodman:

A call has been issued by the prophet Isaiah - a call to all who thirst, to come to the waters.

We are all hungry.

We all hunger for many different things.

What are you hungry for?

You know, I know a place-

I know a group of people-

who come together, because they are hungry-

because they know hungry people.

They cook meals. They bag groceries. They unload thousands of pounds of food.

They pick up bread. They wash dishes. They vacuum floors. They talk to neighbors. They make sure that we are good stewards of all we have been given.

They see hunger and want to feed people in any way they can.

We invite you to come join us. Bring your hungry hearts and hungry souls. Come to the waters.

Come through the doors. Come to the table. Feed their hunger. And feed yours.

AMEN.