

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13A) August 3, 2008
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 55:1-5
 Psalm 145:8-9, 15-22

Romans 9:1-5
 Matthew 14:13-21

Behold what you are. Become what you receive.

The story of Jesus feeding the crowds is told more often than any other story in the four Gospels. Each of the Gospels tells at least one story of Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands, and the Gospels of Mark and Matthew tell the story twice [Mark 6:30-44, 8:1-9; Matthew 14:13-21, 15:32-39; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13]. You can see how important this story was to the early community, for the story was clearly linked to the Eucharist. We often think of the Eucharist as originating with the Last Supper, but the early Church also put a great deal of emphasis on Jesus eating with his disciples in Galilee, and, after the resurrection, on his returning to eat meals with his friends.¹ In different ways each of these meals anticipates the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Today's Gospel passage makes the connection very explicit. Jesus asks the disciples to bring him what little food they have -- five loaves and two fish -- and he orders the crowds to sit down on the grass. Take a look at the next sentence: "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds" [Matthew 14:19]. If you had a pencil, you could underline the four familiar words that we always hear at the Eucharist: "take," "bless," "break," and "give."

This morning's Gospel gives us a chance to reflect on how we are formed and shaped by the Eucharist. When you and I were baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we discovered the deepest truth about ourselves: that we are the Beloved of God. That is our deepest identity: we are God's Beloved. Yet it takes a lifetime to live into the truth of our Belovedness, to make it incarnate in everything we say and do, so that in the very nitty-gritty details of our lives, from the moment we get up in the morning until the moment we fall asleep at night, we not only remember in some abstract and rather distant way, "I am the Beloved of God," but more and more fully *become* the Beloved, become who we really are.

¹ Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today*, Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984, p.154.

You may have noticed a few months ago that we made a small change in the Eucharist, which is printed in the service leaflet. After the Lord's Prayer, the celebrant breaks the bread and says: "Behold what you are." And we reply, "May we become what we receive." Rob brought these lines back after a visit to the monastery of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, and the words can be traced all the way back to St. Augustine, who, sometime in the 4th and 5th centuries, preached a sermon on the Eucharist [Sermon 57, "On the Holy Eucharist"] in which he reflected on "one of the deep truths of Christian faith: through our participation in the sacraments (particularly baptism and Eucharist), we are transformed into the Body of Christ, given for the world."²

The point is that every time we receive the Eucharist, we are transformed -- or should be transformed -- a little more fully into the Body of Christ, so that the divine love that made us and that flows through us can become more fully expressed in the world. How are we formed by the Eucharist? One place to look is in those four gestures: "taken," "blessed," "broken" and "given." I am indebted in these remarks to the priest and writer Henri Nouwen, a friend and mentor whose book, *Life of the Beloved*, is on my very short list of top spiritual books. As Henri says, the words "taken," "blessed," "broken," and "given" summarize the life of a priest, because whenever I come together with members of this community and celebrate the Eucharist, I take bread, bless it, break it, and give it. "These words also summarize [our lives] as [Christians] because, as [Christians, we are] called to become bread for the world: bread that is taken, blessed, broken, and given. Most importantly...they summarize [our] lives as... human beings because in every moment of [our lives] somewhere, somehow the taking, the blessing, the breaking, and the giving are happening."³

What does it mean to say that we are "taken"? To be "taken" by God is to be chosen, to be precious to God. As Henri puts it, "Long before any human being saw us, we are seen by God's loving eyes. Long before anyone heard us cry or laugh, we are heard by our God who is all ears for us. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we are spoken to by the voice of eternal love."⁴ Claiming and reclaiming our chosenness is the great spiritual battle of our lives, for in a competitive, power-hungry, manipulative world, it is all too easy to forget that

² Text written by Society of St. John the Evangelist, sent to me courtesy of Brother James Koester, SSJE. Initially, the celebrant at SSJE invited worshipers to the Table with a longer statement based on St. Augustine: "Behold the mystery of your salvation laid out for you; behold what you are, become what you receive." This was later shortened and made responsive: "Behold what you are." "May we become what we receive."

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992, p. 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

God has taken us, God has chosen us -- easy to slide into self-doubt and self-rejection.

Knowing that we have been taken by God, that we have been chosen, is the first thing we need to claim as we behold what we are and become what we receive. The second is to recognize that we are “blessed.” The word “blessing” comes from the Latin word, *benedicere*, which literally means to speak well of someone, to say good things about someone. We all have a deep need for affirmation, to know that we are valued not just because of something we did or because we have a particular talent, but simply because we *are*.

Henri tells a wonderful story about the power of blessing in his community.⁵ For the last ten years of his life, this renowned spiritual teacher and best-selling author who had taught at world-class universities lived as a chaplain at the L’Arche Daybreak community in Toronto, a community for people who are mentally and physically disabled. Henri describes how one day a handicapped member of the community, Janet, asked him for a blessing. Henri was distracted, and rather automatically traced the sign of the cross on her forehead. Janet protested, “No, I want a *real* blessing!” Henri realized how unthinkingly he had responded to her request and he promised that at the next prayer service, he would give her a real blessing. After the service was over, when about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor, Henri announced, “Janet has asked me for a special blessing.” He didn’t really know what she wanted, but she made it crystal clear: she stood up and walked over to him. He was wearing a long white robe with large sleeves that covered his hands as well and his arms, and when Janet came forward and put her arms around him and put her head against his chest, Henri covered her with his sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of her robe.

As they held each other, Henri said “Janet, I want you to know that you are God’s Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God’s eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house, and all the good things you do show what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.”⁶

As he said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at him, and from her broad smile, Henri knew that she had really heard and received the blessing. After Janet returned to her place, another handicapped woman raised her hand -- she, too, wanted a blessing. She stood up and put her face against his chest, and

⁵ Ibid., pp. 70-72.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 70-71.

before long many more of the handicapped people took a turn, expressing the same desire to be blessed.

Henri says that, for him, the most touching moment came when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year-old student raised his hand and said, “And what about me?” When I heard Henri tell this story, he mentioned that this was a big, burly guy with a neck out to here, probably a football player. This fellow came forward and Henri wrapped his arms around him and said, “John, it is so good that you are here. You are God’s Beloved Son. Your presence is a joy for all of us. When things are hard and life is burdensome, always remember that you are loved with an ever-lasting love.”

As Henri spoke these words, John looked at him with tears in his eyes and then he said, “Thank you, thank you very much.”⁷

How hungry we are for blessing! And we *are* blessed, for God is always speaking a word of blessing in our hearts. When we know ourselves as blessed, we can’t help but speak good things *to* other people, and *about* other people, and call forth their beauty and truth. As Henri says, “No one is brought to life through curses, gossip, accusations, or blaming... As the ‘blessed ones,’ we can walk through this world and offer blessings. It doesn’t require much effort. It flows naturally from our hearts.”⁸

We are chosen and blessed. And we are broken, too. Everyone in this room is broken. We all have places of loneliness or fear, places of disappointment, shame, or grief. We all know the pain of broken relationships, and we all face death, which Henri calls “the most radical manifestation of brokenness.”⁹ Accepting and befriending our brokenness is part of the long journey of entrusting our whole selves to the care of God, so that, as St. Paul puts it, we know that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” [Romans 14:8]. And it is important to place our brokenness in the light of God’s blessing, to experience it within the context of God’s love. When something ‘bad’ happens to us, it can be tempting to let that event fuel the fire of our self-rejection, to say to ourselves, “You see? Of course that happened to me. I always thought I was no good. Now I know for sure -- the facts of my life prove it.” But when we know ourselves as God’s Beloved, we experience our suffering differently -- maybe as a kind of purification, or as a way to enter a deeper communion with a loving God who, in Christ, allowed himself to be broken.

We are chosen, blessed, and broken -- to be given. “Our greatest fulfillment lies in giving ourselves to others,” writes Henri. “...Our humanity comes to its

⁷ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

⁸ Ibid, p. 82.

⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

fullest bloom in giving. We become beautiful people when we give whatever we can give: a smile, a handshake a kiss, an embrace, a word of love, a present, a part of our life... How different would our life be were we truly able to trust that it multiplied in being given away! How different would our life be if we could but believe that every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply as long as there are people to receive it... and that -- even then -- there will be leftovers!”¹⁰

Do you remember our Gospel story? As Matthew puts it, “All ate and were filled” [Mt 14: 20], and even after those thousands were fed, the leftovers could be piled up in twelve baskets. That is the promise of the Gospel: that as we know ourselves to be taken, blessed, broken, and given, we will become bread for the world. Our lives will feed and bless those around us in more ways than we can ask or imagine.

In our Eucharist this morning, we see “a sign of God’s desire and intent to feed not only us but this whole hungry world.”¹¹

Once again, we behold what we are.

May we become what we receive.

¹⁰ Ibid., p 106. 123.

¹¹ From Prayers of the People, WALK OF WITNESS For the Fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals, for use on July 20 or July 27, 2008.