

I was in the super market last week just as it was about to close. My daughter begged for supermarket sushi but I really went so I could get ice cream. That's a great, symbiotic relationship if you ask me. It was interesting to see how, at the end of the day, the shelves were empty, and it reminded me of the early days of the pandemic when people were literally fighting over toilet paper. I was deeply saddened by the hoarding at that time and the selfishness it revealed. And how foolish it was to be so shortsighted not to see that buying up all the supply would ruin the supply chain as everything was coming to a grinding halt.

That episode a year back reminded me of our readings today which occur in the context of scarcity, but God is able to provide. At that time, I thought of how, at the church, we have giant rolls of toilet paper in every restroom and a closet full of extra so we can resupply each restroom when needed. And do you know where else this is the case? Every office, school, gym, church, and so on and so on in the whole country. So that if someone really ran out of toilet paper do you know where they could have gone to get more? Anywhere – including Church. God certainly does provide, but we must have eyes to see it. And having eyes to see, requires a way of life.

We see this demonstrated in second Kings today. Most of us are familiar with Elijah but it's not as common to remember his assistant Elisha who takes over after Elijah is brought up to heaven in the whirlwind of fire. In today's reading, we are in the context of a famine. Why a famine? The people of Israel were returning to worshipping Baal as their neighbors did and this god was said to have the power over rainfall and crops. So God's going to show them. And while in the famine, a series of miracles is performed by the prophets of God like Elisha. Today we have someone coming from a town named after Baal but clearly one who worships Yahweh instead. He is obeying the Torah and bringing the first fruits of his harvest to a priest for a sacrifice. But Elisha is no priest and adds a twist to the tradition by giving the person's sacrifice to the people in need. The man brings the offering, sees Elisha as a prophet of God, and all ends well. Even though he could have feared the consequences of his actions during a famine, he persisted in his holy living. His way of life opens the door to God's work and the people are fed.

He is not unlike the boy in our reading from John who is called upon to offer his food, in the middle of the wilderness. It's a risky thing for him to do as well. We all have to eat. He offers barley loaves and dried fish – the food of the poor. So, the disciples have nothing: no ideas, no initiative, and no food, but find this poor boy who seems willing to share whatever he has. And just as we see in so many other stories in the Bible: Moses, David, Mary, God can work with even the least of us, like this little boy. It seems John wants us to focus on this and other details so an important point can be made.

Foreshadowing the last supper, Jesus gives the food directly to the people rather than the way this story is told in other gospels where it is distributed through the disciples. Through the type of food and this detail, the poor are highlighted in this episode. This is a messianic banquet. It has a greater purpose than simply feeding the hungry. In this way, Jesus does not act out of compassion as we read in the other gospels. Notice it says the crowd followed him because of the signs he had done. He even challenges them before feeding them by asking Phillip how in the world it could be possible. It focuses our attention on the question: are we looking for

immediate gratification, or a way of life that truly gives life? They want to possess Jesus because he feeds them but he escapes to a lonely place. Do we want to possess the divine or allow the divine to possess us?

Miracle stories can be tricky because they let us off the hook if we focus on divine intervention. For some, this can be helpful occasionally, however, I usually think it's more like relying on a superhero and dreaming about what if. But when we allow ourselves to delve deeper into the details of accounts like today's, we no longer possess the passage and sit back satisfied, instead we allow the passage to possess us and inspire us to grow into our faith. Here, we are challenged to see the poor and be Christ for them. Like the disciples who come to Jesus and present him with a problem, Jesus doesn't immediately solve it but uses this as an opportunity to test them. They fail the test because they see no way to help those in need. We are presented with opportunities and challenges to live into our faith, all the time, and the opportunity to be like the boy or the man in the story from second Kings who show us not to look for our own, immediate gratification but to follow a way of life.

In our tradition as Episcopalians, as American Anglicans, we have a deep well to draw from as we attempt to follow this way of life we call Christianity. Of course there is the Book of Common Prayer and I encourage everyone to take a look through it and see all the book has to offer for daily prayer, meditating on the psalms, and prayers for all sorts of occasions. It is a fantastic aid to our faith that even people from other Christian traditions look to as a resource. And I'm also thinking of great Anglicans such as Jeremy Taylor who is known for writing The Rule and Exercises for Holy Living and its companion, The Rule and Exercises for Holy Dying. He has written: *In the morning, when you awake, accustom yourself to think first upon God, or something in order to his service; and at night also, let him close thine eyes and let your sleep be necessary and healthful, not idle and expensive of time, beyond the needs and conveniences of nature.*" Imagine if we all did even just this. What peace, what focus, what joy would be ours.

And of course, any who are in church today can be credited with making an effort at this way of life. Even if you are in church via live streaming. You have taken time on a leisurely day to focus on God when we know so many have not. It is a credit to you and I hope it is providing a sense of joy, peace, satisfaction, inspiration, and comfort that will last you through the week. For many, in a moment of despair or impatience our minds might return to a prayer or the lyrics of a hymn that can keep us going; it might help us see a situation clearly or in a holy manner and in that moment, we might be salt and light to another, or simply not lose hope, all because we have made the effort to be at prayer as part of this way of life.

A way of life like Christianity may not be incredibly remarkable all the time and can even be quite challenging. Sometimes it requires Kung Fu focus. At others perhaps the strength to forgive or humility to ask forgiveness. But even though Christians may fail, this faith practice is really the way to go. It can give a boy courage to offer all he has to eat to help the poor and the hungry, or inspire a man to walk in a famine to make an offering of thanksgiving to God, or maybe just keep us from falling into despair and buying up all the toilet paper in the world. It's a great way to go. I can't think of any better.