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Mark 6: 30-44

## THE GREATEST PRAYER, PART IV: GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

As I was driving to the church the other day, I saw a worn and faded bumper sticker on the back of a van. I couldn't read the whole thing because it was torn at the corner, but I didn't have to. It is one that has been around for awhile and it says, "It will be a great day when schools have all the money they need and the air force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber".

Bumper sticker ethical confrontation – sometimes the only places we get confronted these days. It is quite possible in our time and place to live an existence where you only hear one side of the story, one single narrative that gets endlessly reinforced until you have no ambiguity left anymore – no sense of gray in a realm of black and white...our sense of "truth" being confined to only the loudest voices, unchallenged by confrontation. In his book The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer, John Dominic Crossan has been presenting us with the idea that the Lord's Prayer is just that – a confrontation in the midst of our settled lives...a prayer that interrupts our plans and asks us to consider what we are doing, what we are choosing and where we are going.

The "air force bake sale" confronts us about resources, something that we should be adept at listening to now since the acquisition, proper use and justification of resources is the single dominant argument in our social spheres. In the supposedly "lean" times, the questions are what is crucial, what is truly needed, what is superfluous and what is downright wasteful? Could it be that our real dilemma is not facing shortfalls as much as facing choices about what our resources will be used for? It is easy to be caring and generous when the money is pouring in, but what do we care about when times are tight? Do we become more...or less selfish? Do we lean more towards a belief that our resources are OURS, or do we surrender to the knowledge that they never were to begin with – we were only caring for what is ultimately God's?

Crossan asks a similar question, one which he frames in the story of a body of water called by many names – Lake Kinneret is the modern name, but Mark called it the "Sea of Galilee", John called it the "Sea of Galilee also known as the Sea of Tiberius" and Luke referred to it as the "lake of

Gennesaret”. This is the list of names for a body of water that sits north of Jerusalem near Nazareth from which the River Jordan flows into the Dead Sea to the South. At Jesus' time it was an important fixture in the depressed local economy and served as a means of subsistence living for the people of the area. Note that Jesus calls fishermen to be disciples and that Mary Magdalene is called so because of the town of Magdala from which she hails, which was located on the shores of this lake. The gospels are full of fish – so much so that one of the earliest symbols for the “Jesus Movement” was a fish. Even today we see that symbol attached to the backs of cars, though I doubt it evokes the same radical anti-imperial ideas that it did then.

Crossan wants to know something particular about Jesus – why first century Palestine? Why Nazareth on the outskirts of this very area? Why would he arrive on *this* scene? And why, as he asks pointedly, would two separate resistance movements against the Roman authorities, one led by John the Baptist and one by Jesus, start precisely then and there?

His answer is a confrontation, for he shows us the historical and political pieces that were in place when these movements started and why the concept of choices – the same choices the Lord's Prayer emphasizes – is so crucial. After Herod the Great died, the Judean Kingdom he ruled for Rome was divided up among his sons, Archelaus, Antipas and Philip. Antipas got the region with this lake, but he wanted more. In fact, he wanted to control all of the land his father originally ruled. So, his plan was to follow his father's template – curry Roman favor with praise and money and gain local popularity with a careful politically motivated, historically appealing marriage. Herod the Great had married a Hasmonean princess, the previous Judean dynasty that ruled before the Romans came in. Herod Antipas divorced his wife, an Arab princess, and persuaded Herodias, granddaughter of one of the most beloved Hasmonean figures, to divorce her husband – who happened to be his brother Herod Philip - and marry him.

Then he went on with phase two. The first capital city, Sepphoris, was land locked and already grew about as much cereals, grapes and olives as it could, so trying to increase tribute there was unlikely. So instead, Herod Antipas builds a new city, called Tiberius in honor of the new emperor. It sits on the western shore of the lake, a clear sign that this would be the new source of increased production. Romanization of conquered lands began with commercialization of resources and this was his move to exploit the lake like he was already exploiting the land. Why so many fishermen? One reason was that you could make a subsistence living on the lake, but farming was so commercialized that you could scarcely pay your tribute to Rome and feed your family. Well, Antipas was ready to bring that wonderful system to the shores of Galilee and to make of fishing and industry...one that would serve the few at the expense of the many.

So when John the Baptist criticizes Herod Antipas for divorcing his wife to marry his brother's wife, it is more than a moral statement, it is interference with Herod's royal agenda. And when Jesus recruits fishermen and people from the general area, he is gathering those directly affected by the advent of Tiberius, a city meant to herald the arrival of a new agenda. Antipas intends to multiply the loaves and fishes for Rome, but as we heard in the scripture reading, Jesus has something else in mind.

This parable – the feeding of the multitudes – comes in a few forms, sometimes the feeding of the four thousand, sometimes the five thousand, but always with a crucial pattern – take, bless, break, give. In the story, Jesus confronts his own disciples on the shores of this very same lake. When they see the endless crowd starving for hope but also growing in physical hunger the disciples say, “send them away”. But Jesus tells them, “You give them something to eat.”

Mark takes it for granted that Jesus can do whatever he wants. Jesus has healed many, ended a storm on the lake and raised a young girl who had died by this time in the gospel so his capacity for miracles is well established. The question is, what is the miracle here? It is important during this miracle to watch what Jesus is doing or not doing. Jesus sets up the conflict – is this “send them away” or “give them something to eat”? And Jesus' answer puts the delivery of the miracle clearly in the hands of the disciples. When the disciples respond with, “are we supposed to spend a fortune on their supper”, he answers, “how much do you already have?” “Five loaves and two fishes” is the reply.

What comes next is, I think, the key to this miracle. Jesus has the crowd sit down in groups of fifties and hundreds...why? Why would you do that kind of organization in the midst of a miracle, Crossan asks? Why bother? In my mind I imagine those groups looking at the disciples sharing their food and reaching into their own baskets, into their own pockets and finding that section of bread that they grabbed before they headed out the door to follow the crowds...I imagine them reaching for their wineskins or salted fish and giving some to their neighbor...I imagine the disciples, instructed by Jesus, to be a model...I imagine a miracle of sharing, a ritual of communion occurring like a flash mob, spontaneous and miraculous.

Jesus takes the food they have, not the food he has made appear, not the water he has turned to wine or a stone he has transformed into bread, but what is already there...he blesses it by giving thanks for it, breaks it so that it may be shared and gives it away. In that action, Jesus portrays what is a central feature of Christian life, though perhaps not as obvious as it should be...namely that the Great Divine Cleanup of the World involves a fair distribution of God's creation for all of God's people. Our gratitude should inspire generosity in us, instead of producing a sense of self-righteousness or reinforcing our sense of entitlement. How many times do we hear people who are exceedingly wealthy say that they are “blessed” without asking what assumptions are being made by that claim? And what does the gospel sound like in a world in which the top 1/10 of 1% average 950 times more income than the bottom 90%? That is the call of empire, not the divine justice of enough.

According to Crossan, Mark's claim in this parable is that there is more than enough food already present on our earth when it is matched with God's “enoughism”, the sense of equity that comes with divine justice. The World Hunger Organization says that, “World agriculture produces 17 percent more calories per person today than it did 30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase. This is enough to provide everyone in the world with at least 2,720 calories per person per day. The principal problem is that many people in the world do not have sufficient land to grow, or income to purchase, enough food.” That land is being purchased by larger entities, taken up in beef production that is then shipped out to McDonalds so we can have a “dollar menu” or taken for corn

production that will only produce bio-fuels. The problem is not enough, it is how we distribute it, what we do with it and maybe, just maybe...practicing less entitlement and more gratitude.

The same is true, of course, of energy. There is enough right now, just not enough for the typical western use of energy. There is enough food, but not for the typical western diet. There is enough for people to live well, but not enough for some to live exorbitantly while others starve. And here is where we come back to that lakeside city called Tiberius being built for an economic system that will place more in the hands of a few while the many are pushed even further down the ladder. Jesus with his non-violent resistance, found in both the Lord's Prayer and this parable, says that this may be the Kingdom of Rome, but it is not the Kingdom of God.

After Easter comes, Jesus makes appearances according to some of the gospel writers. John pictures him at the lake again – and this time he specifically calls it Tiberius. There the disciples are fishing again, with no luck. This strangely familiar man appears on the shore and asks, “have you no fish, my children?” When they say no, he tells them to cast their nets a different way, to use a different method...and they cannot pull up the nets for the abundance. This is no longer the sea of Tiberius, it is the sea of Jesus.

The Jesus plan has us ask new questions and see with new eyes. Food, possessions, the land, no longer are ours but gifts from God, we are merely stewards of it. The Jesus plan is marked by equitable distribution and a move from the individual to the communal, which is one reason that I think people have a hard time meshing the teachings of Jesus with 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity in the US. It's why so many struggle with a church that has largely lost its way and follows the path of empire rather than the Jesus plan. We are such individualistic people, but Jesus wants us to look beyond ourselves to see how we are connected one to the other just as he wants us to see food as given by God for all, not grown or accrued *by you for you*.

As Crossan points out, a four-fold process of “take-bless-break-give” is established in the Jesus plan. It is the antithesis of the empire's “take-take-take and take” plan. And it shows up at *this* table. “While they were eating, he *took* a loaf of bread, and after *blessing* it he *broke* it, *gave* it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’” In Communion we have a *practice* of the very Jesus plan that is the miracle of the the feeding of the multitudes. Communion enacts “take-bless-break-give” and gives us an example of what our reordered world might look like...this Great Divine Cleanup...this miraculous sharing. Its why we gather for this meal...we *practice* things that we want to be better at – we practice soccer or the piano, we practice our speech, rehearse for the play, study for the big test...

This meal, at this table, where everyone is welcome and there is always enough...where we share with one another and take the bread, bless it, break it and give it to our neighbor...this is the re-imagining of the world...in practice.

We come to this table broken, with troubled hearts and uncertainty, with pain of all kinds, with bad breath and band-aids, with memories of careless things we have done and fresh scars from recent attacks, both on us and by us...we come worried about germs and afraid that we might drop the bread

into the cup...here we are – the rough material, the basic supplies, what is available. And the miracle is that when we group together...all of us of equal value, when we come to the table with a spirit of take-bless-break-give, every one a child of God...it is enough. It is enough for a miracle.

Come to the table...



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