

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville – Proper 12B – July 26, 2009  
Homily by Ruth Eller

Today's readings show us the difference between what happens when the power of God is invited into the human scene and when it is locked out.

Think of David—the man after God's own heart. He is the anointed leader of Israel, God's people. In last week's reading we heard about how anxious he was to give the Ark of the Covenant a proper home. Now here he is breaking a number of the commandments enshrined in the Ark. He covets another man's wife (number ten) and commits adultery (number 7). Perhaps it is even rape—after all, we hear nothing of Bathsheba's feelings in the matter. And then he connives to cover up the deed by arranging murder by proxy. He sends the husband into the very front line of battle, where he will undoubtedly be killed (number six).

What has happened to David? Just this: he has cut God out of the picture. His kingly power has blinded him to the demands of God's justice. The irony of all this is that the husband, Uriah, who is not even an Israelite, is meticulously observant of Israel's law and customs—a loyalty which seals his doom. Since Israel is at war, he refuses to go home to sleep with his wife, which would cover up the fact that she has been made pregnant by the king.

This is a dark chapter indeed. The gospel presents us with a striking contrast. Of course, the settings and the stories are quite different. But the potential for human selfishness is certainly present in the gospel. The difference is that this selfishness is thwarted when the power of God's abundance is invited into the scene.

Picture it: all these people have rushed around the lake to see the newest celebrity—this healer or teacher or whatever he is. Comes time for lunch and Jesus wonders how they're going to feed them all. Now steps forward one young boy with a couple of fish and some loaves of bread—small ones, probably, like little pitas, or rolls. So they share this around—and amazingly there is more than enough for everybody. Way more than enough.

Let's think about what's happening here. First of all, Jesus asks the question: Where are we going to get enough bread for all these people? This question is important. It says something about who Jesus is, what his values are. How many politicians or pop stars or even evangelists would give a passing thought to feeding a crowd that's come to see them? After all, they are the wonderful thing, the center of attention. Just seeing them ought to be enough for the crowd, right? But Jesus' mind works in a different way. He puts the people's needs first—even before he's had a chance to preach to them, to be a star.

The next thing to notice is that one person—an unlikely one, too, a young boy—steps forward to share his few bits of bread and fish. The disciples almost laugh at the offer—“What are they among so many?” But Jesus recognizes the gesture for what it is—God's generosity working through a human being. (That is how God's generosity usually works, isn't it? Through human beings? Isn't that what our local food pantry is all about?) Anyway—he gives thanks (notice this—the meal seems so small, but he gives thanks). Then he orders the boy's offering to be distributed—and look what happens! Suddenly there is an abundance, an overabundance, where before there seemed to be nothing. Could the thanks have something to do with it? Inviting God in again.

Some people explain this event by saying that many people had actually brought some food along, just for themselves. Through the boy's example and Jesus' faith, the hardness of their hearts was softened and they opened their knapsacks and shared with their neighbors. Whether it was this or some kind of paranormal occurrence doesn't really matter. The point is that God's power was at work there, whether in the multiplication of the loaves or in the opening of the closed and selfish human heart. And which, after all, would be the greater miracle?

When it's all over, they want to make Jesus king. But that's exactly the kind of power Jesus does not want. That kind of power tends to corrupt. (It certainly corrupted David.) So Jesus flees the scene.

David the king and Jesus who would *not* be king—how differently they see the world in these stories, and so how differently the world behaves. The story of David goes on, of course, to show David getting on the right track again. When Uriah is killed, Nathan the prophet brings home to David the horror of what he has done by telling him about a rich man who seized a poor man's pet lamb to feed to a visitor. David is incensed, and swears he will bring the thief to justice. Nathan proclaims: "You are the man!" And so God is invited into the scene once more.

So we return to our starting point: the difference between what happens when God is invited into the scene and what happens when God is shut out. Shutting God out and letting only our own vision, appetites, and ambitions, guide us can harm both other people and ourselves. We can hurt other people actively—like David in his behavior towards Uriah and Bathsheba—or passively—like people who never think to share their picnic lunch. And we can hurt ourselves spiritually. Our world is bound to shrink to our own little dimensions.

We view others as means to an end rather than as people who might enrich our lives; we look on the universe as a limited, predictable, and finally boring place, where nothing amazing ever happens, and there is never enough of anything to go around.

But invite God into the picture, and your world enlarges. It isn't just that you follow the rules—it's that people become real to you, different and precious and therefore to be protected and taken care of, even fed, as their Creator intended.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the way of life into which we are baptized. It *is* respecting the dignity of every human person. It is *not* grabbing what's rightfully theirs just because you want it, or think there isn't enough to go around. (Think: natural resources. Think, health care.) It *is* generosity; it is *not* tight-fisted control. (Think: the use of this building.) The best shepherds of congregations, communities, and nations, Christian or not, live and lead this way. And when they don't—they at least have the grace, like David, to listen to the truth-tellers, and repent.

What's true for our leaders is true for us all. We can choose how we treat other people. We can use them for our own pleasure or manipulate them so we get our own way, as David does with Bathsheba and Uriah. Or we can ask God, every day, to give us the power to see them as beings separate from ourselves, whose needs must be as important to us as our own—as Jesus does in today's gospel.

We can choose to see a world of scarcity, stuffing our little lunch-bag as full as we can and hiding it so nobody else can get at it. Or we can ask for the power to see a world so blessed with God's abundance that we gladly share what we have, and urge others to do the same.

Luckily this enlargement of our life isn't entirely up to us, or we'd never achieve it. Providence is always sending the prophet to confront us; or the boy with the bread and fish, and Jesus to give thanks and bless the meal.

Jesus to bless the meal—ah, yes. If you ever need to be reminded of the abundance and generosity of God, just think of what happens here around this table. There's this little round of bread—and when we give thanks, and invite the power of God to break it, it can be broken and broken and broken again, until all are fed. The priest could start with just one little host, and still, all would be fed.

That Sunday lesson is more than enough for the week to come, don't you think?  
Invite the power of God—and all are fed.