

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

During Lent and Easter, our focus has been on “community”...what Jesus means by community and how we build that community. The following story reflects that effort.

The Reverend James McCutcheon describes an incident involving Fiorello LaGuardia, the mayor of New York City and a late night courtroom. “In January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter’s husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from who the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. ‘It’s a bad neighborhood, your Honor. She’s got to be punished’.”

“LaGuardia, turning to the woman, said: ‘I’ve got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions – ten dollars or ten days in jail’. As he pronounced sentence, LaGuardia was already reaching in his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed into his famous sombrero saying: ‘Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in the courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant’.”

So the following day, the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and a New York City policeman, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.”

As this story relates the inter-workings of a community on a cold Winter night, the readings for today describe how we recognize the needs of our neighbor and act on those needs. Like LaGuardia recognized the injustice within his city, the Psalmist reminds us that when we seek God, the poor shall eat and be satisfied. In 1 John: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another. No one has seen God; if we love one another God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

The readings are a clear reminder of what our role is in the Kingdom of God: become my disciples and feed my sheep. As the mayor of New York City demonstrated to those present in his courtroom, Jesus is reminding us of our role in our community.

Let’s consider the story we heard in the Acts of the Apostles. In Frederick Buechner’s book, Peculiar Treasures, a Biblical Who’s Who, he describes the encounter this way. “His name isn’t given, but he was Secretary of the Treasury under Queen Candace of Ethiopia, and he had been to Jerusalem on a religious pilgrimage. He was cruising along in his chariot reading out loud to himself...when the Apostle Philip happened to overhear him and asked if he understood what the words were about....the way things happened, pond turned up by the side of the road as

they traveled along, and the eunuch said why shouldn't he give the thing a try right then and there? So Philip baptized him, and when that black and mutilated potentate bobbed back to the surface, he was so carried away he couldn't even speak. The sounds of his joy were like the sounds of a brook rattling over pebbles, and Philip never saw him again and never had to."

We live in a time in which the focus is on who should be excluded vs. included; who is to be feared vs. who is to be helped; who is to be marginalized vs. who is deserving of our love; and who is cut off from basic requirements for human survival vs. all who should receive a loaf of bread and given a safe shelter and be accepted into the Body of Christ. We live in a time in which church membership and attendance is on the decline and the words of the Bible seem to be just that: "words".

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that in order to affect change, we must act. He says: (15:4) "Abide in me as I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing...If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and be my disciples."

We are the fruit of the vine who are commissioned to go out into the world and be Jesus' disciples. We are charged with enlarging the table so that all may have room to feast and receive the body and blood of Christ; we are charged with tearing down walls that separate us and building bridges that unite us; we are charged with opening doors that have been closed to the needy and giving bread to the scared and the poor and hungry. We are charged with sharing the Good News with everyone. No exceptions!

The Very Reverend Tony Clavier describes the appointed readings this way: "Philip knows that, as the writer of 1 John will write later, loving God and being loved by God demands that we love others. Philip also knows that the only hope he has to get through the barrier of differentness is to claim what happened to him when he was baptized. In baptism, he was grafted into Jesus, the true vine. Jesus' love alone enables Philip to love the Ethiopian enough to share what he has come to know, what has enabled him to become a disciple. And now that loving discipleship is going to bear fruit as he leads the Ethiopian to a pool and there to be baptized, adopted, grafted, welcomed into the Kingdom. The Queen of Ethiopia's servant is to become the servant of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

We are on the same journey that the Book of Acts describes. We have been adopted, grafted, welcomed into the Body of Christ. And, accordingly, we are charged with being one of his disciples. Our job is to pass the hat around to one another and fill it with nourishment and shelter and faith and hope and love and then go out into the community and give it away. And in doing so we fulfill the commandment found in 1 John: "Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also".

In the words of Bishop Westcott, let us pray.

Almighty and merciful God, who has given us a new commandment that we should love one another, give us also grace to fulfill it. Make us gentle, courteous, and forbearing. Direct our lives so that we may look to the good of others in word and deed. Hallow all our friendships by the blessing of thy Spirit, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.