

*A sermon given on Sunday, July 31  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***Loaves and Fishes and Debt Ceilings and the Common Good***

Once again we hear the story of loaves and fishes – one of few incidents in Jesus' ministry which is reported in all four gospels.

I've got a quirky little commentary on the Gospels written in the Middle East in the 1930's. It has a novel explanation of what happened that day in the crowd. In the Middle East, it says,

when the caravan is on the road, every man tries to conserve his supply of bread. Some men pretend they are short of bread and blame the shortage on their wives ... because, while Middle-Easterners are generous in sharing their food at home, on the journey [it might run out.] ... This all changes on the return journey [when they know they have enough, and are willing to share.] Men who had previously stated they did not have enough, suddenly display many loaves which they pull from [the capacious folds of] their garments.

Jesus went to seek a lonely place, but he was followed by the large crowd. In accordance with custom, these travelers surely carried loaves of bread and fish.... [Many] were afraid Jesus might stay a long time in the desert and they were fearful lest they would not have sufficient to last the time they spent, [so they hid it.] When Jesus decided to dismiss the crowds, ... [those] who had concealed their bread and now [realized that] Jesus had finished preaching and that they were about to return home, produced the food saved in their garments and offered it to the hungry crowd.<sup>i</sup>

And, hey presto! The Feeding of the 5,000!

Well, what do you think? For anyone who would deny the possibility of miracles, this could be an attractive explanation. I suppose even this version of the story carries a certain salutary lesson. Selfish people starting to share is a good thing. Bill Wiedrich, a former assistant bishop in Chicago, used to tell a similar version of the story, and his ending was always the same. "You tell me," he'd ask dramatically, "which would be the greater miracle: to produce 5,000 loaves of bread where there had formerly been none, or to produce 5,000 generous hearts where there had formerly been only selfish ones?"

I myself am inclined to think that in order for this story to have survived essentially the same in all four gospels, something rather amazing must have happened that day – something more remarkable than a bunch of selfish people realizing that the bread stuffed in their fanny packs was starting to go stale and they might as well share it! I am willing to believe that the universe is open to God's intervention. I am ready to believe in a miracle. But Bishop Wiedrich has a point – the miracle of provision had to be coupled with the miracle of sharing. All the food in the world would not have fed 5,000 people without a generosity of spirit, commitment to the common good, and some hard work to get that food distributed.

For the past two weeks our nation has been consumed by political drama in Washington surrounding the raising of the debt ceiling. With 36 hours to go, it appears that perhaps a miracle is required there. And as with the story we've just discussed, it's clear that no divine miracle can resolve this mess unless it is coupled with a generosity of spirit, commitment to the common good, and hard work. Honestly, this episode has been discouraging in the extreme. The vitriol and personally demonizing rhetoric are bad enough. But beneath them are exposed norms to which we have become accustomed: the entrenchment of opposing self-interests, the absence of reciprocity, and a diminished commitment to the common good.

If we think such trends exist only at the national or political level, we deceive ourselves. They are also personal and cultural, and they are manifest in our own lives. Daily at my dinner table I hear stories drawn from the local public library. Patrons are routinely outraged at the expectation that library materials have meaningful due dates. The notion that materials are there to be shared widely amongst a larger populace, and not only for the private use of one borrower, seems to be a foreign concept. Or, consider the evolution of fundraising for charitable institutions over the past 30 years. In few places is it any longer adequate to appeal for outright support without some reward for the donor – a mug, an iPod, a gift certificate. Just giving for the sake of giving, it seems, isn't enough. These are but two illustrations; you could offer your own. It's a question of self-interest vs. the common good, and self-interested entitlement seems to be getting the upper hand.

You and I will feel personally helpless as regards this week's perilous gridlock in Washington. What we can do, in a big picture way, is to re-commit ourselves to the health of institutions which push back against a culture of individual self-interest and entitlement. The church is one. So also are cultural, civic, and voluntary associations of all sorts which bring people together for commitment to one another, or to a larger cause which advances the common good.

I have been reading Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' book, *The Dignity of Difference*, a section of which pertains. Sacks argues for the importance of institutions and communities in which we develop what he calls "the grammar and syntax of reciprocity, where we help others and they help us without calculations of relative advantage [and] where trust is born."<sup>ii</sup> He quotes political economist Francis Fukuyama, who writes

If the institutions of democracy and capitalism are to work properly, they must coexist with certain pre-modern cultural habits that ensure their proper functioning. Law, contract, and economic rationality provide a necessary but not sufficient basis for both the stability and prosperity of postindustrial societies; they must as well be leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty toward community, and trust.<sup>iii</sup>

In other words, says Sacks, "markets depend on virtues not produced by the market, just as states depend on virtues not created by the state." These things matter, says Sacks – reciprocity, moral obligation, duty, and trust –

these things matter not only in our individual and familial relationships, but also in our culture and society. Call it what you will:

Sociologists speak about trust, economists about social capital, socio-biologists about reciprocal altruism, political theorists about civil society. What these various terms signify is that social life cannot be reduced to a series of market exchanges. We need [social] covenants as well as [economic] contracts; meanings as well as preferences; loyalties, not just temporary associations for mutual gain. These things go to the heart of who we are. They are 'signals of transcendence.'<sup>iv</sup>

The events in Washington this week, however they may turn out, are a warning for all of us. A reminder of the consequences of entrenched self-interest, the absence of reciprocity, shattered trust, and a diminished commitment to the common good.

Today we have a Gospel lesson in which the disciples were overwhelmed by the task, but reassured by their Master; a story in which the disciples intend to make each person fend for himself individually, but are overruled by Jesus' communal solution; a story in which seemingly paltry resources are made to suffice, through the combined grace of hard work and the Spirit.

Placing the cautionary tale of Washington alongside today's Gospel, I invite you:

- to push back against prevailing individualism;
- to search your own life for evidence of genuine commitment to the common good;
- to measure actions by the ideals which they make manifest;
- to share copiously;
- to cooperate respectfully;
- and to serve fearlessly.

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<sup>i</sup> George Lamsa, *Gospel Light*, 1936; reprinted (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 346.

<sup>ii</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London/NYC: Continuum, 2002), p. 151.

<sup>iii</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Trust* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995), p. 11; as cited in Sacks, p. 152.

<sup>iv</sup> Sacks, p. 157.