

GOD MAKES DO

Sermon for Pentecost 8B, Proper 12—Jn 6:1-21

LPC, 7/26/09

(Portions of this sermon derive from Bring What You Have, a sermon originally delivered by the author at Christ Church, Kensington, MD, 7/31/05)

I just finished reading an interesting book called *Rainbow's End* by Lauren St. John. The author, a white woman whose family lived in Africa for four generations, writes of her childhood in Rhodesia during the war that turned Rhodesia into Zimbabwe.

At one point the author writes of her shock at discovering that her father is an atheist. By way of explanation, the father says that he can't believe in any god who would allow all the suffering in the world.

According to things I've read and heard, this is a common explanation for rejecting the idea of God. It's an understandable view, but I think it gives God a bum rap, and too easily lets humanity off the hook, both individually and collectively.

In other words, a person has no right to complain that God has done nothing for human suffering unless he or she has done everything within his or her power to alleviate human suffering.

It's clear from the Bible and from human experience that God's method is not to change the world wholesale without human participation. God's clear purpose is to involve human beings in the business of saving the world. I've preached about this before.

Thus, a person has no right to "tut" about children with swollen bellies in Africa unless that person is willing to help alleviate starvation, at least with regular and substantial donations to organizations that specialize in that purpose. Likewise with other egregious examples of suffering in the world.

Now naturally one person's \$50 a month or whatever will be a drop in the bucket of solving world hunger, and even that may be more than many people can afford. But everyone can afford something, unless he or she is personally starving. Of course it's not just a matter of money. Many members of this congregation participate in the St. Luke's Soup Kitchen or Faith in Action Caregivers. Still others are particularly helpful to friends who are grieving. You may already be doing the ministry I'm talking about. If so my message is to tell you that you are helping God save the world.

Every Christian is called to minister in the world. Nobody can do everything but everyone can do something.

It's not just that although our individual efforts may be puny our collective efforts will change the world. It's also that God takes whatever we offer and does wonders. God "makes do" with whatever piffling effort we can muster.

In today's lesson from John, which is paralleled in Matthew, Mark and Luke, we have Jesus making clear that humans are to take an active role in God's work of feeding the hungry, healing the sick and standing for justice for the poor. Furthermore, the enormity of that task is no excuse for not trying.

In this story a large crowd has followed Jesus to a remote place and they're hungry. Jesus asks Philip, one of the disciples, how they can be fed. Philip protests that the task of feeding so many is too big. Andrew however, donates a small boy's picnic supper. (No one knows how the boy feels about this.) From these few articles Jesus feeds 5000 people, with 12 baskets of leftovers. Jesus "makes do" with the meager fare he's offered and does the unimaginable.

Analysts have wasted time arguing about really happened. Did Jesus really miraculously multiply the food, or were people simply moved to generosity and sharing by Jesus' presence and teaching? These questions are irrelevant. The point of the story is quite simple: Jesus took a tiny bit of food and fed a lot of people.

The narrative tells us that Jesus takes, blesses, gives. This is Eucharistic language. At communion, the priest, audaciously imitating Christ, takes the bread in his or her hands, blesses and gives it to the people. And people are fed.

It is the same with our other offerings. Our money. Our time. Our talents. We bring them to Jesus, even if they seem totally inadequate to the task. Jesus takes, blesses, and gives, and the kingdom of heaven comes closer.

The really interesting thing is that the same concept applies to our liabilities as to our abilities. In other words, just as we can bring our gifts to Jesus for him to take, bless, and give for the kingdom of God, so can we also bring our faults, sins, addictions, temptations, our knee-jerk reactions, our shame, our guilt, our pain. And same principles apply.

If we are really willing for Jesus to take our faults or our pain and not hold on to them, Jesus will bless them, making them holy as he made all of human life holy by becoming human himself. Jesus will break them like bread and destroy their power over us. And then Jesus can give them for the kingdom of God. We see this happen when a recovering alcoholic becomes a mentor for someone else trying to break the addiction. We see this when a breast cancer survivor goes into hospitals to inspire and encourage new cancer patients.

People are not excused from helping to save the world by their own weakness and the enormity of the problem. No offering, no matter how piffling, is too small. But when Jesus takes, blesses, and gives, many are fed. The kingdom of heaven comes closer.

No offering to God is too small. God makes do. And how.