

Jon Hauerwas – August 12, 2018 – “Bread for the Journey”
Exodus 16:2-15 and John 6:35, 41-51

After college, I spent a year as a Young Adult Volunteer working with the homeless in Edinburgh, Scotland. I always wondered about the causes of their homelessness, and the work was particularly meaningful when residents of the short-term hostel would open up to me and tell me something about lives. Often, their parents were addicts or homeless themselves. The lessons learned and taught were often unhealthy or inconsistent. Both nature and nurture were shrouded in chaos, conflict, and uncertainty.

I sensed that many of the homeless had been lied to often and abused by those entrusted with their care. One man showed me the many scars on his wrist from years of “cutting.” He came to ask me for a bandage for his most recent, self-inflicted wound. Another man, originally from Northern Ireland, showed me a tattoo which he said represented his affiliation with a nationalistic terror group seeking Irish independence from the United Kingdom.

One man showed me a video of himself playing guitar on stage at a concert in New Jersey with a heavy metal rock band. Another resident was an Iraqi Kurd, fleeing conflict in his homeland where his life was in danger. There was a German

woman who supported herself through prostitution, and countless others. Most of the residents were addicted to alcohol, illicit drugs, or both.

Admittedly, my work with the homeless was peripheral. As assigned, I cooked, scrubbed toilets, and peeled potatoes all night, while the paid, long-term staff was understandably more engaged – offering counsel and seeking to connect the residents with housing and other life services for a more stable future.

With the exception of a few other volunteers, I knew no one else in the country. My work was often tedious and repetitive. I was lonely and far from home. As Christmas approached, I dreamed of returning to the United States to visit my family. I longed for the comfort and security of my old life.

But, I remained in Scotland. It was my job. On Christmas Eve, we began making preparations for a holiday meal. That night, we decorated the common areas. On Christmas Day, the residents filed in. They looked a bit somber, and I imagined that they were lonely too. But, when they entered the space and saw the Christmas tree and tinsel, smiles flashed across their faces.

We sat at the table together. We talked. We ate. We shared a moment in time. Our lives were connected. And then, as they departed, they offered their thanks. Though I sensed a sincerity in most, the words of one young woman were particularly meaningful. She turned to me and said how lovely it was that we had given up our holiday, decorated the space, and made the best meal for them that we were able to provide. “I just want to thank you,” she said, “for spending your Christmas with *us*,” motioning to the others.

In that instant, I began to understand the power of the communal table. A chill shot up my spine as I tried to process what was happening. That a homeless woman might teach me about the purpose of table fellowship.

Eating and drinking is a vulnerable act. It is a lesson in trust. To eat and drink what we have not prepared is to place our faith in the chef. The wrong ingredients or cooking methods can make us very ill. They can even kill us. And yet, finding the proper nourishment throughout each day is an essential part of life.

In the Bible, humankind is often compared to sheep. In Psalm 23, for instance, God is the shepherd who leads us beside still waters and through rich, green pastures.

The message here is that God is faithful in providing for all of our needs. When God sets the table, we are the vulnerable recipients of it.

Like the ancient Hebrews who received manna from heaven; like the 5,000 families whom Jesus fed with seemingly so little at hand; like the homeless woman in Scotland, and countless others like her all across the world who observe in their deepest needs the gift of companionship and the bread of life.

Friends, the message for us is a powerful one - that unless we are able to view ourselves as being in need, then any talk of faith is for naught. Yes. People of faith are acutely aware of their own vulnerabilities in this world. So even at the height of their professional or personal accomplishments, faithful people recognize that they are in need. For to be in need is to be fully human.

Speaking of humanity, earlier this year, I sent off a vial of saliva to a laboratory, which was then processed for information about my ancestral heritage and genetic code. The results stated that I am British, German, French, and Swiss, with a tiny drop of Italian in the mix. Each of these, of course, are categories for understanding our human identity.

This week, I was reminded of my results when I read today's lesson from John's Gospel. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'" They then "began to complain about him... saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" In response, Jesus said, "'I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died... I am the living bread that came down from heaven.'" "

In other words, our human categories will inevitably let us down. Rich and poor. Homeless and stable. Straight and gay. Foolish and wise. Caucasian and those of color. What really matters is neither our genetic code nor our station in life, but our hunger and thirsty all that God can provide. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we shall see face-to-face.

So we come to this place and approach this Table, expressing the heights and depths and lengths of our human vulnerability. And in seeking the bread of life and the cup of salvation, we receive the assurance that everything that satisfies the needs of the human heart is found in him. May it be so, and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.