

Hope is the Memory of the Future

by

Dr. Jane Via - July 30, 2006

I remember being a grad student at Marquette studying Scripture and discovering the Elijah and Elisha stories for the first time. I was shocked to learn that Jesus was not the only holy man and prophet of Israel who could heal, change the condition of the waters, raise the dead, befriend women and non-Jews, and give food and drink to crowds. But I also saw the continuity in tradition unfold before my eyes. Like the prophets before him, Jesus lived out his connection to the Judaism of his time in classic prophetic acts, including service to those in need.

The readings for today bring this continuity of tradition and the importance of serving those in need directly into focus. In the story of Elisha taken from 2 Kings, we encounter Elisha the prophet telling a man who brought him a gift of 20 loaves of bread to give the bread to the people to eat. It was a time of famine in the land. When the man resisted, not understanding how so little bread could feed so many, Elisha explained in prophetic language: "Thus says God, 'They will eat and there will be some left over.'" And there was, as God had said.

In the gospel, we encounter Jesus reenacting this prophetic role. He tries to get away from the crowds by taking his disciples to a remote spot for a respite, but the crowds follow him. Although it wasn't what he had planned, he was profoundly moved with compassion for them. He feeds their hungry longing for spiritual attention and direction by teaching them. Then, when the disciples want to send them away to buy food, Jesus tells the disciples: "You give them something to eat." Like Elisha's visitor, they don't understand how Jesus expects them to feed so many with so little and they protest. But when Jesus insists, they set about to feed the crowd, bread from their own meager resources, bread blessed by Jesus. And there was some left over, twelve baskets left over, symbolically enough for all Israel.

There are so many Catholics today who can't find God in the church, Catholics who need to be fed. And there are so many other people with a longing for the sacred in their hearts who cannot find a place in any religious tradition. These readings suggest, among other things, that it's our job to feed them. Elijah and Jesus limited their roles to empowering their followers to feed the crowds. The task of feeding the spiritually starving belongs to those who follow them. This raises for us the same question for us asked by Elisha's visitor and Jesus' disciples: How can we ever feed so many with our limited resources?

But we can feed the spiritually starving of our time and there is bread with which to feed them. We can feed them, not with loaves and fish, but with hope and prophetic disobedience. As impossible as it seems, we can feed them: feed them with the hope evoked by the restoration of women's ordination; feed them with the hope of restoration of a discipleship of equals; feed them with the hope of a church renewed; feed them with our prophetic disobedience as we challenge the institution to practice inclusion rather than exclusion, to embrace women and married priests, gay & lesbian people & priests, divorced and remarried people, to welcome all at the table. We can feed them with hope as we respect tradition and traditionalists but engage in ecumenism and inter-faith work. We can feed them with our willingness to accept the consequences of prophetic disobedience with dignity and courage. Hope, prophetic disobedience, inclusion - ingredients of the food that is the bread of God.

I invite you to join me in taking on this task. Have compassion for the crowds! Talk about the Roman Catholic Woman Priest movement! Spread this good news! Uplift hopeless hearts! Tell them about this vision of Jesus' church! Live the radical inclusion to which God and Jesus call us. And when possible, feed the physically hungry as well.

Jesus reached out to the Jews of his time who were considered irregular, unobservant and not "really Jews". We are called to reach out to the people of our time who are considered irregular, unobservant, "not really Catholic", "not religious", to all who long for the holy, in whatever context they encounter God, however "irregular" they may be perceived. Jesus dined with Pharisees, debated the meaning of Torah, Prophets and Psalms with the Pharisees and other religious leaders of his time. He ministered to those Jews who simply weren't able, for whatever reason, to connect to the Judaism of their time. He ministered to people who weren't Jewish at all. Likewise, we are called to intrachurch, ecumenical and inter-faith experience, ministry and leadership.

We're called to build a house of "hopes and dreams and visions", as we sang in our opening song; a house where "prophets speak"; a house "where all God's children dare to dream God's reign anew"; a house where "peace and justice meet"; a house where "the love of God is revealed in time and space". And, as we will sing after communion, the "cloud of saints will be our witnesses" as we struggle to accomplish this task. We can feed them. And if we trust, there will be enough left over, enough to feed the whole church, enough to feed all the spiritually hungry of the world. Finally, in the process of feeding others, we embrace the hope to which we were called by Jesus, according to the author of Ephesians, we feed ourselves, and we become a community of hope.

Corita Kent, an artist, professor of art, and member of the Immaculate Heart Community, inscribed these words in large letters on one of her vibrant, colorful serigraphs: HOPE IS THE MEMORY OF THE FUTURE. Until recently, I had a hard time deciphering a message in this cryptograph despite being profoundly drawn to it. Just recently, after my experience on Lake Constance and my experience of how "just the story about it" buoys up others, I feel like I begin to understand. I have a glimpse of its possible meaning. Our task of feeding the crowds is a ministry of hope. What we do now in hope, will someday be a memory for others. When our hope has been actualized in a future church, our actions are transformed into sacred memory.

Beneath the message written in large script, Corita left a message in small script. Let's take Corita's words with us as we leave here today, the large letters written in the center of the serigraph: "Hope is the memory of the future." And let's not forget the small script written underneath: "Have a hand in it."