

## Reflection: Take and Eat, Wait and See

Rev. Brenda Fawkes

Third Sunday of Lent 2010

March 7<sup>th</sup> 2010

Isaiah 55: 1-9, Luke 13: 1-9

There is a tool in the area of spiritual practice (you may be quite familiar with it) called the spiritual gift inventory. This inventory/questionnaire involves a series of questions that help one delve into what particular spiritual gifts they have. The discernment is based on the premise from scripture that there are a variety of different gifts in each community, taking particular form in each individual. It is underlined by the idea from scripture that there are a variety of different gifts but one Spirit that gives these gifts. The purpose of the inventory is of particular use when you are trying to discern purpose in your life (i.e. what is the purpose of your life). As well, it is of use when we are trying to discern our particular roles within Christian community. The theory is that when you are doing what you are gifted at you are less likely to burn out and that you feel a deeper spiritual connection with the one who is the giver of gifts.

I feel that I now know you well enough that I need to make a confession. Years ago when I did this inventory you will be relieved to know that my numbers on proclamation (preaching) were fairly high. However I scored really low, almost zero, on the gift of hospitality. Although this was embarrassing—it is true. Hospitality involves gifts related to providing food and welcome and connection. Now don't get me wrong I can provide a meal, I can clean my house really well should you come to visit, I can even be welcoming and friendly but it is really not my forte and it doesn't come easily.

So when Leenane first told me that the Lenten focus for Dunbar Deepening and the congregation this year was hospitality I have to admit that my stomach did a little flip of panic and then I was glad that in this job-share situation the bulk of responsibility for *this* project would be under Leenane's auspices! Open Homes, Open Hearts. Great idea and dependent on those of you who hold the gift of hospitality.

In today's passage from Isaiah there is a hospitable invitation. In fact it is so convincing that it is filled with imperatives. It is that of a feast.

Everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk

without money and without price...  
...Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.

Here we have a hospitable prophet speaking to a very hungry people. A prophet speaking to a people exiled from their homeland, cut off from their source, thirsting for something that is familiar, giving up on waiting, losing the battle between the posture of hope and despair. And the prophet speaking out of a culture where food is of utmost significance says “Come and eat, share in rich, satisfying food as much as you want and as much as you can eat. And here he is referring to the eternal covenant that God has with God’s people as a rich banquet, a feast, plenty. A street vendor who says come on—if you are hungry to remember, if you are hungry to hope, if you are thirsty to not give up come to this table—it is waiting. Hospitality.

There is a lot that happens, in the bible, in relation to food. Covenant is made, God is remembered, outsiders are included, bodies are nourished. In Israel’s time it was or banquets.

This passage is meant to be one of consolation in the midst of despair. During lent there can be lots of focus on the role of temptation. The things that take us off track in our spiritual path. Lots of times, as we talked about the first Sunday of lent, we equate such temptations as the typical so called vices—particular foods, or habits or in more extreme cases-- the addictions and idolatries that hold us. And these are real. This passage also suggests we include the very real temptation we have to despair, to lose hope or belief or to have amnesia of God’s ways.

Why do you spend money on things that are not bread and labour for that which does not satisfy? The text asks? Come back to the source for what you need. Come back to trust in what God is capable of. Come back to a covenant that started with God’s love for you.

Over the course of the Olympics and all the media coverage we observed, there were some clever campaigns that caught the attention of many. And we know that marketing agencies have experts in the area of what appeals and lures consumers. But nothing irked me more, personally, then every time I saw the Coca Cola campaign that had the slogan: Open a coke, open happiness. Really? Even the person who regularly consumes coke or can’t resist it at any time doesn’t really buy that does it? Open a coke, open happiness. We live in a time when as spiritual people we grow less and less certain of what we believe in—others, seeking profit, grow more and more sure of their ability to convey spiritual or divine promises through products. How’s that for exile? Sure open a coke, open happiness—take on a quick fix, sugary sweet drink and let your blood sugar spike only to fall lower than it was and leave you crawling back for more energy and malnourished of what you really need: belonging, purpose, renewed,

rested, connected. Isaiah's culture depended on the image/metaphor of food and comfort for meaning and spiritual revelation. But so do we. And what imperative will call us back to the source of who we are to remember and recall and to be fed and held out of despair into hope.

Isn't it interesting that the practice of hospitality is what can be that call back. What better Lenten practice than that to help us to know and remember—to open happiness—not in a simplified easy way but in a way that we are called back to conversation if we find ourselves in exile. Our culture uses food just like the Israelites to speak of God or to make tangible something that we somehow know but don't know how to describe. Look what happens when someone dies, or is sick or undergoes a difficult time. What do we do—make food. We cook and bake and take food to grieving families. When natural disaster strikes we load our ships and bombers with food and water to revitalize the broken places. We offer what brings life. And hospitality, and those who are good at it can be a call when we most need it—a call to come and feast and return to the source of what feeds and nourishes.

A Story: There was a family, a couple that had lost their child partway through his life. Years and years went by and the mother was inconsolable. Nothing seemed to help her in her grief. Her anguish was unrelenting. Her husband got an idea of having a former minister (with whom she had a very good relationship) come to see her. He speaks of flying to where she was and meeting with her for more than three hours. But nothing seemed to reach her cognitively or emotionally. She was quite isolated and had become (in the minister's words) captive to her own despair.

But several weeks after the minister's visit he got a note from her thanking him for the visit and then an explanation that it was not only the deep loss of her son that crippled her but in it also...the apparent absence of God. She was left searching and hungry. Exiled from everything she knew and trusted to be true. The minister, of course, had no easy ideas or perfect explanation for the death of her son. Nor could he since there are no words for that. But he encouraged her to return to the conversation with God—to not be afraid of her side of the conversation being one of lament or anger. He encouraged her to keep bothering God—to come back to the table so to speak. To not accept exile and isolation as her sentence but to return was imperative. What he gave her was hospitality. An invitation, a direction, a hosting for a way back.

In that action he also reminded her of what the prophet Isaiah says to those original exile people—he says our thoughts are not God's thoughts nor our ways God's ways. In other words just because we do not yet understand does not mean that God is silent. The invitation is always to come back to the table. We cannot limit God to what we can understand but we stay in the relationship. The hospitality invitation is one whereby, even in our most Lenten time, we can take and eat while we are waiting to see. Take and eat—while our minds are seeking understanding.

In recent studies of younger seekers in to the Christian Church we were told that the post modern generation wants more ritual and fewer words and explanations. That although there is lots about our tradition that they detest—communion is not one of them and they want sacrament and ritual—with our without explanation. Maybe that is because they are hungry for hospitality and belonging and to know the covenant celebrated at table—to take and eat while they wait for deeper connection; or clearer understanding. Maybe they know something we don't while we sit in exile. I am grateful to the Dunbar Deepening group and all who will host and all who will come as guests on our Lenten journey. In our intentions for Open Homes and Open Hearts we echo an ancient imperative—everyone who thirsts—come to the waters. Everyone who hungers—come buy and eat without price. Maybe this will keep you on your Lenten pathway. Take and eat while you wait and see. May it be deeply satisfying to our souls.

Amen.