

JULY 26,2009
PENTECOST 8, 2009
“BENEDICTION”

Let us pray: O prodigal God, you who in your abundant grace supply all our needs beyond our imagining, help us to curb our appetites and desires and to share your bounty. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

You know the word “benediction” as our name for the concluding part of the liturgy when the pastor speaks words of blessing on the about-to-depart congregation, as today you will find me sending you out with the words, “Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bless you now and forever. Amen.” The word “benediction” really comes from two Latin words meaning simply “good words,” the literal counterpart to another word we sometimes hear in church, particularly during funerals, a word derived from two Greek words, “eulogy” —the words spoken in praise of a

recently departed loved one — eulogy also meaning literally, “good words.”

Today’s second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians contains a benediction or eulogy of sorts that, as I now enter my final month of pastoral ministry among you, strike me as particularly fitting parting words to leave with you — not my words, but God’s good words. Paul, or perhaps it was a disciple of Paul’s writing in his name, begins by describing how he is praying on behalf of the Ephesians, “*bow(ing) his knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name,*” God being the origin and destination of us all.

And what is Paul praying? He is praying, “*according to the riches of God’s glory*” — that is remembering our Gospel story of the feeding of the 5000, God’s prodigal grace — “*that Christ may dwell in your hearts **through faith**, as you are being **rooted and grounded in love.***” As I told our Church Council the other evening when we

used this Ephesians text as our devotion, being “*rooted and grounded in love*” is a wonderfully vivid and down-to-earth way of describing this central reality of our life together as a faith community. Here we should remember how our Natural Church Development surveys listed “Loving Relationships” as among the healthiest of our “quality characteristics” and an area in which our “score” grew between our first and second surveys. This matter of being “rooted and grounded in love” is a strength upon which you as a congregation can grow — “faith active in love” being Martin Luther’s way of describing this everyday dimension of our Christian calling of neighbor-love.

Some of you’ll remember a book of a few years ago by J.B. Phillips, who in the 60’s wrote a contemporary translation of the NT that was quite popular. His famous book was entitled “Your God is Too Small” which argued that people are in the habit of

underestimating God's power, of whittling God down to our own puny human size in order to fit our own human needs and desires and preconceptions rather than letting God be God. Ephesians way of putting it is "*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*" This has certainly been a big part of my goal as pastor and preacher, to proclaim the good news that God is beyond our control and manipulation and finally even our understanding, except as God has chosen to reveal godself in Jesus, God's prodigal grace incarnate. It is to Jesus that we are directed always to both experience God and God's will for our lives. God can't be packaged to fit our needs or programmed into our schedules. God is in this sense "wider than the measure of our minds" as one of our old

hymns sings it. And we glory in how God surprises us with ever new ways as we heard recently from the Book of Lamentations:

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never end; they are new every morning....”

But finally, we should take as literally “good words” of benediction Ephesians’ assurance that God, who through the Spirit is the *“power at work within us,”* is able, and what’s more, has promised to *“accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine.”* This is the moral of the story, of course, of our Gospel reading of the “Feeding of the 5000,” one of the very few stories from Jesus’ life and ministry to be found in all four Gospels. The miracle of the story is not simply that Jesus is somehow able to feed the 5000 from the meager resources of the boy’s five barley loaves and two fish. “What are they among so many people?” as the skeptical disciples asked.

That's miracle enough of course, but the true miracle is compounded and underlined in Jesus' order to the disciples to gather up the left-overs which amazingly turned out to be 12 baskets-full after everyone had eaten and been satisfied. Now that's abundance! That's more than enough! Now that's a prodigal God.

“More than enough!” might really be said to be the motto of the kingdom of God, of God's reign, of the economy over which God is king—an economy of abundance not that is wasteful and spendthrift and exploitative of our natural environment, cut-throat and manipulative in our treatment of our fellow human beings. But “more than enough” in the sense that God provides all that is necessary for human thriving—the issue is how we share, how we distribute, how we consume the world's resources amid a world full of desperately needy people who do not enjoy an adequate share of the world's resources.

Especially in the midst of our ongoing global financial crisis, which for a time at least has served to put a big question mark over the kind of idolatry we have practiced here in America in making the so-called free market the be-all and end-all of existence, perhaps we can use this crisis of confidence as an opportunity to encounter anew the truth of the Gospel of our super-abundant God who promises not to fulfill our every desire—but more than fulfill our every need—like the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, as Jesus once memorably put it.

Being fresh from last week’s meeting of the Advisory Board for our Lutheran Office of Public Policy, where Mark Carlson, our Lutheran “lobbyist” in Sacramento, led us in a consideration of the nature and consequences of the current budget stalemate our legislature and executive our mired in, it’s clear that we as Californians are in an especially desperate situation—and

of course “the least of these our brothers and sisters” —the poor, the ill, the uninsured, the unemployed, the frail elderly and the children, being in special need—and especially in need of advocacy, of the voice of the churches advocating on their behalf.

A couple of weeks ago on behalf of our Advisory Board for the Lutheran Office of Public Policy I attended a conversation with former Governor Pete Wilson at the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, you know the public policy think tank, in which our former Governor reflected on the budget crisis he and the legislature faced during our last major recession in the early 90’s. I was in Ann Arbor during those years and so wasn’t all that aware of the situation in California but, in a sense, it was good to learn that we’ve faced similar budget problems in the past and have managed to get through them—despite partisan wrangling and a legislative-executive rivalry and an ailing economy.

But our current budget stand-off— which makes governmental bankruptcy a real possibility— has revealed some long-standing structural defects in the politics and economy, the political economy, of our state that simply must be addressed. Our job as Christians is to use our best wisdom in seeking God’s priorities in the midst of this crisis— which of course is not some simple directive of a voice from above, but the result of our best efforts and God’s Spirit in moving us from political partisanship or apathy to serious moral deliberation regarding the specific policy issues that will be identified along the way.

No, there isn’t necessarily a distinctively Christian “fix” to our current budget deadlock. But there are Christian perspectives and priorities that need to be voiced in the debate, perspectives and priorities that often are not represented by

the various lobbyists and special interests that gain access to the decision-making circles of government through the power of their money and influence.

Interestingly, in St. Mark's version of this same story of the feeding of the 5000 I read from St. John's Gospel for today, we find a little detail lacking in today's reading. St. Mark says that "*when it grew late, Jesus' disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.'*" You see, Jesus' disciples were no dummies. They anticipated a problem and proposed a solution which was essentially, "let the crowd feed itself." But in Mark's Gospel Jesus responds to his disciples' "policy" recommendation with these words: "*You give them something to eat.*" You see, Jesus is making the crowd's problem, his disciples' problem.

I've got to confess that like the disciples' I'm often tempted to punt in the face of large public policy issues arguing that the problem's too large for us churchfolks to tackle—and that it's a government problem anyway. I well remember back in the early 80's in Milwaukee soon after I'd arrived how a change in mental health policy on the heels of the so-called Reagan revolution ended up in putting—very suddenly—all kinds of homeless people, many of them mentally ill, on the streets of the city just as winter was coming on. And we in the central city churches felt we needed to do something about it—and started emergency homeless shelters and overflow sites for the winter—for, of course, in Midwestern winters being homeless is literally a matter of life and death—one can't sleep outside as here in LA so many find it necessary to do.

I well remember one crusty old Catholic priest from Gesu church up the Avenue who argued against our efforts to

supply the homeless with emergency shelter, pleading that it was the government's job to house the homeless, and if we churches started doing the job—even out of the best of intentions—it would soon result in an even lower standard of living and care for the poorest of the poor as government would simply and gladly hand the responsibility on to the churches—and something we as a city and nation should be responsible for would simply become the responsibility of the churches. And I've come to think old Fr. Irv was probably right on this one.

And yet, we need to remember Jesus putting the responsibility clearly on his disciples' shoulders: "You give them something to eat," Jesus said which I take to mean not that the church, the followers of Jesus, must be the direct providers of food and services—which they so often are as our so-called "safety net" of social services continues to fray. But "you give them something to eat," means in a larger sense,

you the church—my followers—see to it that they have something to eat”—which means not simply direct service, but advocacy and holding our political authorities responsible for their role in feeding the hungry as well. That’s why we Lutherans are so well known for the quality of our commitment to social service and social justice here and around the world and have established and continue to support some of the finest agencies in the world: from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services to Lutheran Social Services, from Lutheran World Relief to our own Hunger Appeal and the ecumenical Christian hunger lobby founded and led by Lutherans, Bread for the World.

“You give them something to eat,” is Jesus’ clear mandate that while ours is a bountiful and even prodigal God—a God of plenty—that it is our job to see that God’s bounty is justly distributed and reaches those who need it most. These are words of bene-

diction—good words that send us into the world—as well.

The peace that passes understanding
keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.