

THROUGH LAMENT TO THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving Sunday, October 13, 2019

The miracle bread that Jesus gave to the hungry crowds (who had been following him and listening to him all day) must have tasted very good. Even if it was very plain, they were hungry, so it was bound to taste good. And so a few of them followed Jesus because, well, he was giving out free bread, and they were poor and hungry. It makes perfect sense. When Jesus had went away, they were back lamenting their lack of daily bread again. And they wanted him to be the solution to this problem, as he'd been before.

But Jesus' response to these hungry people is very mysterious (John 6:25-35). In effect, he tells them that what they are really hungering for is not physical bread -- or even steak and potatoes -- but God. (It's a key text for understanding the Eucharist.)

Jesus is frustrated in this text, because -- as he suggests -- if these folks had understood what he had been teaching them all day, their **main desire** would not be for "more bread" but for a deeper relationship with God. And, toward that end, they would have wanted to follow Jesus. But, instead, all they wanted was more bread.

A few years back on Thanksgiving Day, I was visiting with a lovely lady named *Sofija*, who lived in one of the nursing homes in St. Marys. Sofija was Latvian, 93 years old, a Lutheran, and quite "feisty."

At the start of our conversation, Sofija was **lamenting** -- *fairly dramatically* -- about how unappetizing the food they serve at the home often is. Especially the green beans!!! -- which were **always** tasteless and **never** warm enough.

She'd investigated this situation, and found out that the home had hired "a bunch of young kids" who (1) don't know how to cook, and (2) don't really care how the food tastes, and (3) don't even care if it's still warm when they serve it. And Sofija had thought about all of this, and came to believe that staffing budget cuts and the lack of good supervision were the real problem. But what to do about it?

She was lamenting, because this situation was having an impact on her life. At age 93, many of the things she used to enjoy doing, she no longer could. And one of the simple pleasures that she still wanted to experience was the pleasure of enjoying a good meal with her friends. But often, that just wasn't happening. Over and over again, she found herself lacking this **one... simple... thing...** that, she **knew**, would help her enjoy life more.

But interestingly....., as she talked....., I watched her somehow move **through** this place of lamenting, **into** a place of thanksgiving for her life. She did it spontaneously; without any help from me, beyond listening. And I discovered that, at bottom, she was actually **very thankful** and very happy to be alive -- in spite of all the upset she'd been experiencing over the food.

When I commented on the change that I had seen her experience, she explained to me how she thinks it works.

She said, "*it all started in prayer.*" When she prayed, she would start out by expressing all her frustrations and complaints about whatever was happening in her world that she didn't **want** to be happening. She started out with **lament**. And, then, she said, "*I would suddenly remember God. It's as though God would interrupt me, and remind me that **I have God, and that God has me.***" She would start to see the things that were bothering her in the light of this "bigger scheme of things." And, then, she said, "*something just happens.*" Somehow she would inwardly just move out of lament and into thanksgiving. And now this same thing happens to her even when she's not praying.

But don't think for a moment that she just kept quiet about the food problem! She would regularly "counsel" the kitchen staff and the home administrator on how they could do their jobs better. But **she'd learned to wait** to speak to them until God had taken her "edge" off, so she could speak in a way that was less harsh and more generous than when she was lamenting "*the error of their ways.*"

As I thought about this, I was reminded of that **ancient spiritual cycle** that we see **over & over again** in the Psalms. First, the encounter with some injustice in the world; Then, the movement into lament over the injustice; And then, the transforming encounter with God that moves the Psalmist out of *lament* and into a larger vision of life that inspires thanksgiving and praise.

I wondered how Sofija was able to learn this spiritual cycle so well that it happened not just when she was formally praying, but in the middle of her everyday life experiences. As she told me more of her story, I realized that she had learned it the same way we all do – the hard way.

She was born in Latvia, and during the war she was taken by German soldiers and placed in a concentration camp. Everything she had, except God, was taken away from her. And in that darkest of situations, she learned something fundamental about the spiritual life.

She had learned what the Psalmists were doing. She had learned what Jesus was teaching the bread-seekers in today's gospel text:

At any particular moment, I may not have food, *and that I must lament.....* but I still have **The Source** of all food. At any particular moment, my heart may lack love, hope, faith, patience, kindness, or any other good that can be named, *and that I must lament.....*, but I still have **The Source** of all Good.

The **confidence** that she possessed God and that God possessed her – no matter what – had been transforming her mind for many years. It gave her the **insight** and the **inner freedom** and the **motivation** that allowed her to move through the spiritual cycle of lament into thanksgiving and praise. It enabled her to understand that the quality of her life is affected not so much by the things she **has** or the things she **lacks**, but by **how she responds** to that lack or abundance. Over and over again, she had learned to respond to **whatever** was happening by inwardly cleaving to God -- and not letting go.

It's something we only seem to learn the hard way. The most important things in life are the hardest to obtain.

In our processional and recessional hymns this morning, we hear images of holy "battle" and "war." They're not meant to be taken literally. They speak to the great "inner "battle" of the spiritual life – in which we learn, over and over again, to respond to whatever is happening in our lives by inwardly turning and cleaving to God – and not letting go. This is what moves us through lament into thanksgiving.

This was the secret that got Sofija through life in a terribly inhuman context, and now it is getting her through the lesser frustrations and indignities of living in a nursing home at age 93.

If you listen to her while she is lamenting, you might think that all she wants in life is a decent meal, much like the people who came to Jesus in today's gospel text. But appearances can be deceiving. She wants much more than that, something only God can satisfy. But, still, she has to cry out to God about those wretched green beans! It's part of the process. She has to get that out of her system; so she can remember, once again, that God is with her, and that God is ultimately what she most wants and needs.

After she shared her story, Sofija was ready to receive Communion. And as we said the sacred words & ate the bread & drank the wine together, I could see in her face that nothing mattered to her more than this. Everything else had become peripheral.

On my way out, she said to me, "Did you know that the word 'Eucharist' means 'Thanksgiving'?"

I actually **did** know that little fact. After all, I took Greek! But at that point I was speechless.

Thanks to Sofija, I had learned how little I actually understood Thanksgiving. That was her gift to me: She sparked my desire to understand it better. And I hope that this morning, by the grace of God, I have been able to pass that gift on to you.

Thanks be to God.

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