
Blessings at a Funeral and an Auction

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Proper 11B in the Revised Common Lectionary

Jesus said, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." ... As they went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. -
-Mark 6. 31, 34

Our gospel today presents Jesus going out to a lonely place. He withdrew to a place apart, as he often did, a places where he might nurture his relationship with God, and also his relationship with people.

For when Jesus came to the shore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Thus, he taught. He became their shepherd by teaching.

Today's gospel selection does not say what happened after Jesus taught. In fact, our gospel passage sadly omits the middle section of Mark, chapter six! Let me tell you what happened after he taught. Quite simply, he fed. Immediately following this teaching, Jesus fed five thousand people. Yes, this is the gospel of Jesus feeding the five thousand, with five barley loaves of bread and two fishes, after the disciples have been so anxious about where in this lonely place the people would find something to eat.

In a lonely place, we are often more aware of our real hunger. In a lonely place, we are often more aware that we are missing our shepherd. In a lonely place, is where God acts.

For a brief minute yesterday, I was one of those who felt like a sheep without a shepherd. And I was not alone. There was a great crowd of us. All of us had traveled to St. James Church, Hendersonville, North Carolina, for a funeral service for the Right Reverend Bennett Sims. Bennett Sims was a retired bishop of Atlanta, and he was the bishop responsible (or blameworthy!) for developing me as a priest in the Episcopal Church.

I will spare you details and accolades, because there are many who share similar stories. Bennett Sims was, indeed, a shepherd to me; and he died this past week. I did not mind driving three and a half hours to his service, nor did others.

In yesterday's service, we used many of the prayers that Bennett had revised and re-written for his house church. In his later years, he had developed a set of prayers that was based on the Episcopal Church liturgy, but which was much more articulate and expressive in its care of the earth and its concern for justice and peace.

For a minute yesterday, I felt like a sheep without a shepherd. I felt the way people all over the world have felt when they have lost a father. My own father still lives, fortunately, but I imagined yesterday at the funeral that I was feeling like folks do when their father has died. All of us there were, for a moment, like sheep without a shepherd.

But then I realized that the shepherd was there. I mean Bennett, of course, in his witty and wise spirit, and in the beautiful

cadences of his prayers that we were using. Bennett Sims served in the United States Navy. He was an old Navy man, and I believe his military service taught him something about rhythm, precision, and order.

And Bennett was also there in the Eucharist itself, in the blessings, and in the blessing of the wine and the bread, just as all the communion of saints are with us whenever we celebrate Eucharist. You, any of you, who have lost someone dear, can remember that person whenever the Church shares Eucharist together.

I believe that Saint Mark wrote his gospel because he felt like the early Christian community was like sheep without a shepherd. The story of the feeding of the five thousand is a story about Eucharist. When Jesus took the five barley loaves of bread, and the two fishes, the gospels are clear that Jesus did four things, the same four things that the Church does whenever we take communion.

Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples. He took, blessed, broke, and gave - the same four actions in which we will participate in a few minutes. In that action, Jesus himself is with us. The shepherd of the sheep is with us.

In fact, the shepherd of the sheep is with us whenever we bless. This act of blessing is the most important thing the Church does, the most important thing any community of faith does. It is the most important thing you do in your households and in your families. Blessing means speaking good words. Jesus is the shepherd of the sheep because he feeds us with blessing.

Last week, last Sunday in fact, I was in another lonely and deserted place. As some of you know, my wife and I spend summer days in a very rural part of Ontario, Canada. It is truly a place apart, often deserted, where we restore all kinds of relationships.

Last Sunday, Boog and I traveled with two friends to an old barn in rural Ontario. On the outside, the place looked deserted; but inside there was to be an auction. My wife loves sales and auctions. I entered the barn, paid my one dollar for an auction number, and surveyed what was to be auctioned. It was one of the largest collections of outright junk I have ever seen.

There was the usual collection of eight-track tapes and post cards, high-fidelity and stereo sound equipment, electronics devices that had passed their prime two generations ago. There were old dolls with eyes and ears missing. There were little porcelain figurines, barely more than globs of clay in their intricacy.

I paused over an old chain saw and a non-working table saw. There were rickety tables and chairs, made of everything from local pine to imported Formica. Dirty glasses and water pitchers lined many of the tables, kitchenware that I would not eat from if it had been washed a hundred times.

I could not imagine that anyone would bid for any of this junk, much less actually buy some of it.

But they did bid on it. And they did buy it. When the little auctioneer appeared, he carried a little stool, which he would place amidst stack after stack of goods, and upon which he would stand for a better view. He jabbered and joked non-stop. He told mildly off-color one-liners, and he carefully described the merits of each and every piece that was up for auction.

In fact, he found something good to say about every piece of junk in that barn. He spoke good to things and to people. And he sold that stuff. The useless figurines of clay went for fifty-two dollars.

[The only thing I noticed that did not sell was something called a tanning bed. It looked like a cross between an old metal frame lawn glider and an eight-track player. Obviously, the routine is to climb up into the exposed bed, take off as many clothes as you can, and let a fluorescent lamp shine on you for a while.

The woman who wanted that tanning bed looked like she weighed four hundred pounds. I had overheard her before the auction saying how much she wanted the device, and, she said, she had heard that there was no reserve. She was certainly a woman of hope!

The auctioneer started the bidding at one thousand dollars. No takers. He quickly suggested five hundred, then four and

three hundred dollars. He asked folks simply to name a price. One young man opened his hand to say "five." Five hundred? The auctioneer asked. No, the young man corrected him, "Five. Five dollars total."

The auctioneer quickly informed us that he would put an ad in the newspaper selling the tanning bed. If it did not sell that week, he would let the young man have it next week for five dollars. That seemed fair enough for everyone.]

That auctioneer knew how to speak good words. Everyone there was having a good time. I wandered outside and bought a highly breaded hamburger and an orange soda made by a company I had never heard of.

Well, gradually, the material in that auction became more attractive. My wife and friends and I all started to bid. Some of the furniture was not that bad after all. Our little lake cottages could use some of that stuff. So we bid. We got one table for twenty dollars. One of us bought -I am not kidding you""an old bathroom pedestal sink. She's using it for a drinks cooler right now. We bought five old earthenware crock pots for forty dollars. We tried to buy some of the furniture from a previously successful bidder. He made us another deal right there. Finally, as the place was shutting down, our friend bought a small chest of drawers for one dollar.

It took us four car trips to get back to our lakeside cabin. We had a table and six chairs, two huge chests of drawers, the pedestal sink, a beautiful little side table, and several new friends. We had arrived with nothing except some skepticism (and a little money). We left fully satisfied.

And there was more left over. The auctioneers were gathering up what was left over. There must have been twelve rooms left with stuff in them. There would be enough for next week as well.

That auction, in the middle of nowhere, brought people together with good words, good spirit, and blessing. That combination turned trash into treasure. It is the same combination that Jesus used to turn five barley loaves of bread into satisfaction for five thousand.

Where do you go to be fed? When you feel like a sheep without a shepherd, when you are hungry? All of us go somewhere. That place is our salvation. People are being fed where there is life and energy and blessing. Where everybody has a chance, from the least of these to the greatest of these, where junk is turned into treasure, where morsels are turned into feasts, and where there is plenty left over.

At our best, church is like this. Christian community is like this.

Jesus wants to turn our little breaded hamburgers into sustenance. Jesus wants to turn our old high-fi equipment into someone's long-lost missing component. Jesus wants to turn our junk into treasure.

The miracle begins when we take the time to withdraw into a lonely place together, a place apart from the conventional locations for sustenance. The five thousand, remember, thought that they had to go back into the cities and towns in order to find something to eat. Those were the familiar watering holes, the familiar restaurants, the usual over-priced stores, packed with the latest technology and gadgets. Does that stuff really satisfy us?

The only thing that really satisfies humankind is blessing. It is blessing that can turn a one-dollar porcelain figurine into a museum piece. Blessing can turn a loaf of bread into a banquet. Blessing can turn sullen faces into smiles. Blessing turns strangers into community.

It is blessing, at a funeral that turns sadness into joy. It is blessing that turns death into life.

At the close of Bennett Sims' funeral yesterday, we heard a blessing, the blessing that Bennett had written for his little house church, the community of friends and family that met every Sunday at his house.

That closing dismissal goes like this:

Teach us to know our inter-connectedness with all things.

Teach us to grow with each other and all living creatures through love.
The blessing of the God of life is ours,
The blessing of the loving Christ is ours,
The blessing of the Holy Spirit is ours, to renew us, to gird us, to shape us as servants to God's world.

AMEN.

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