

A Sermon for the
9th Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2009
Texts: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day....In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ (or ‘*It is manna*’) For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.’” Exodus 16:4, 13-15

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all....But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for building up the body of Christ...to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ...but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together...as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”

Ephesians 4:1-5, 7, 11-13, 15-16

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you...it is my Father who gives the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...Jesus said, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” John 6:27, 31b-35

St. Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with humility, gentleness with patience, bearing one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Using the spiritual gifts we have to build up the “body”, to bring it to maturity, to the full stature of Christ, speaking the truth to one another in love, as we work together to build one another up in love.” As I read Ephesians this week after my return from New Orleans, I thought, this is what last week’s youth

gathering was about, a brief experience of what Paul was encouraging the people of Ephesus to do.

One of the many memories I brought back is of just being together with so many different people from so many different places but who were joined together, united, in a common Spirit which expressed itself in graciousness, in enthusiasm, in hospitality. As we walked from place to place, venue to venue, we were always in the company of a host of others and, as we passed the other groups who were on the sidewalk with us, we were being greeted by hugs and high fives and “where are you froms?” Everyone was enthused about being part of such a big happening but with everybody enjoying the same purpose, working together to build one another up in love, and working to build up the community of New Orleans in love. That was one of the biggest impressions provided by the gathering: discovering that there was a Spirit you share with a whole lot more people than you imagined, people from all over the country. And these people were all the church along with you.

That enthusiastic Spirit really came out at the mass worship gatherings each night in the Superdome, which were an experience far away from anything the kids probably had experienced before, with something of a rock concert/pep rally feel to them, combined with some pretty inspirational people telling about their personal callings to serve. Marc Kielburger who as a teenager was moved to try to do something about the problem of illiteracy in the poorest, most marginalized parts of the world. He started an organization called Free the Children which, since 1995, has built over 500 schools around the world and has become the world’s largest youth driven charity. Or Viola Vaughn, a retired school teacher and administrator, who moved to Senegal, West Africa with her husband in 2000. She was caring for and teaching her grandchildren when a young girl from that community asked her if she would be willing to help her get through 3rd grade. She started to tutor her. Soon another showed up, and another. Now Viola is executive director of an organization she started called 10,000 Girls that is presently educating and creating employment for 1300 Senegalese girls. Then there was Michel Chikwanine, from the Republic of the Congo, who spoke about how he was kidnapped at the age of 11 and forced into becoming a child soldier in civil war going on in that country, and the violence he experienced and was forced to engage in before escaping, becoming a refugee, and now working as an advocate speaking out about the situation of children in those countries experiencing civil war and violence. All of the speakers were encouraging those at the gathering to remain engaged in the Spirit that brought all of us to New Orleans, a desire to help others, make a difference, change the world for the better.

St. Paul talks about the church being engaged in building one another up so that we can become more and more like Christ, so that we become mature people of faith. Part of that building up involves learning what it is God desires for the world, learning what are the realities of the world, and learning what God is calling us to do about it. Everyday there was a learning experience, but one of our days was particularly devoted to learning workshops. We participated in one that they called “Who’s Got the Cheese?” In it we were educated about the realities of the distribution of wealth in the world - who has got the cheese and who doesn’t. A few have and a lot do not. That sometimes we get caught in seeing wealth and poverty in relative sense, as in I’m not wealthy, compared to Bill Gates or Warren Buffett. But that the reality of the divide between those with wealth and those in poverty is pretty stark. Then we were in another workshop that

sought to educate us about what is meant by biblical justice. That the justice God desires is that all of his children enjoy their share of the abundance of creation he has given. As exemplified in that segment of Exodus we read this morning where God provides food for the hungry Israelites, manna from heaven, which the people are to collect each day, just enough for their household, so that everyone has enough, no one gets too much, and no one suffers from too little. And when that doesn't happen "doing justice" is about working to both alleviate the present suffering and to change the circumstances that are the underlying cause of that suffering.

And of course the continued suffering of New Orleans as a result of Hurricane Katrina was the particular focus of our going there. Our service to the people of New Orleans also served to build us up in our faith and in our living out the calling that Christ has given us. There was a lot that 37,000 people could get done. Many, including our group, were sent to City Park which is one of the world's largest urban parks, half again bigger than Central Park in New York City. It was submerged under 8 to 10 feet of water when the city flooded after Katrina and since then has largely been unusable. There were a lot of things to do to clean it up, renew it, and make it useful again. There were some jobs that were strenuous, pulling up a lot of the weeds and vines that had taken over parts of the park, hauling mulch to renew walking paths, and painting. Our group was assigned the repainting of a fence. Maybe not glamorous but one part of the many that went into a major renewal of that park. And I will tell you, it was just as hot standing there painting that fence as it was for those raking out mulch. One thing we did know is that the people of New Orleans were very grateful for what we were doing. Our group was stopped twice on the street by New Orleans residents who wanted to tell us thank you for being there and doing what we were doing. I heard other groups speak of similar experiences. I've never experienced such a widespread expression of gratitude. That, I think, almost did as much for our experiencing a sense of purpose and accomplishment as actually doing the work.

Then there was the final vital component of the gathering experience, the fun. There were the games and activities of the Interaction Center, and following the nightly mass gatherings, the community activities, concerts, dances, in many of the hotels.

When talking about what the church is we often use the imagery that Paul gave us in his letters of the church being the "body of Christ." And how we are each a part that is vital to the life of the whole organism. But one thing the week in New Orleans opened my eyes to was a new understanding of what Paul is saying in Ephesians today. As he is encouraging everyone to engage in the work of building up, of maturing, of growing into the stature of Christ, the first thought often is to hear that on a personal, individual, basis. To think that, OK, I've got to grow, I've got to mature, I've got to become Christ. But after being with this great gathering of people engaged in one purpose - or to echo Paul in Ephesians, in one faith, one Spirit, one calling - it struck me that Paul is talking about all of us together. Yes, we seek to be Christ to one another. But it is together that we are building ourselves up into the full stature of the body of Christ. Individually we are limited, we can only do small things, a few things. But together amazing things can be accomplished. In New Orleans we were treated to a glimpse of what the whole body of Christ can do. Something we don't always see when we're back at our homes, in our individual congregations, where sometimes the impact of our faith at work doesn't seem all that great. In New Orleans we got a sense of the size of the body of Christ, and how much it can do to bring love and justice to the world. Amen