

THE BREAD OF LIFE/THERE IS A BOY HERE

There was a movie some years ago, back during the Cold War, called “The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming.” Do you remember it? It was about a Russian submarine that was having mechanical trouble, and was forced to surface and dock at a little fishing village on Martha’s Vineyard. When the Russians emerged from their boat and the townspeople gathered on the dock, each side was equally frightened of the other. In spite of the way it sounds, it was actually very funny, I remember, even though it was during the height of the Cold War, with missiles and threatening words filling the front pages. There was a tense moment as the villagers and the crew stood facing each other with guns in hand. A confrontation seemed inevitable – but just then the tension was broken by a cry for help.

A young boy, wanting a better view of what was happening, had climbed the church steeple. A railing had broken and left him dangling precariously some 50 or 60 feet in the air. Suddenly, national and political differences were forgotten as American civilians and Russian sailors worked side by side to save the boy. Their efforts succeeded, and the story ended happily. Do you suppose that really could happen today?

Then there’s today’s Gospel reading about the loaves and the fishes. Jesus and the disciples are at the Sea of Galilee. They are trying to avoid the crowds, so they have found a relatively deserted spot to retreat to, up on a mountain. But the crowds, realizing that Jesus is the one who has been healing the sick of all sorts of diseases, follow him up the mountain. About 5000 of them. This means that when Jesus decides to feed everyone, there aren’t any convenient places to shop. No Trader Joe’s on this mountain. And even if there had been, Philip points out that “six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”

Andrew, one of the other disciples, said to Jesus, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.” Probably a lunch his mother had packed for him before he set out on his adventure of the day. “But what are they among so many people?”

And of course, we all know the familiar outcome of the story – the boy unselfishly gives Jesus what he has -- in the hands of Jesus, what they have is enough. Not only enough, but in abundance, with twelve baskets of leftovers. The subject of many a stewardship sermon on abundance.

“Give us this day our daily bread” we pray, and we mean by that of course far more than just a slice of bread but the fulfillment of our basic needs – physical, spiritual, and intellectual. Jesus, the bread of life, knows that we have to be fed in all three areas, or else we’re incomplete creatures, lacking something, lacking part of the fullness of life that God intends for us.

Mahatma Gandhi, the great spiritual leader of the Hindu people of India, so many of whom were starving, once said that if God were to come to earth it would be in the form of bread. We Christians of course believe Gandhi was right, and that Jesus is the bread of life, God come to earth, for all people.

The prophet Isaiah famously said “A little child shall lead them.” As just one powerful example of that, look at the student-led March for our Lives, the anti-gun demonstrations that are taking place all over the country – led by and the result of the horrendous shooting in the school in Parkland, Florida..

“A little child shall lead them.” Or as we heard in today’s Gospel, “A little child shall feed them.”

“There is a boy here.” When I look at the world today, I see what a mess we’ve made of things, largely in the pursuit of making a few bucks: you can rattle off the list as well as I can, including global warming and being threatened by immigration and a political system that is so polarized as to be useless.– I see what a mess we’re leaving as my generation fades from the scene. And then I look at our grandchildren’s generation, and I see hope. These kids are amazing.

I had an experience just this two days ago that is a perfect example. I had a burial at a lovely little cemetery in Marin that I never even knew was there, although I’ve driven right past it dozens of times. After the graveside service was over and the family had

thrown dirt and flowers down on the plain pine box, one of the adults pulled out several loaves of good San Francisco bread, gave it to the grandchildren, who broke the bread and handed it out to the rest of us. It seemed like a perfect connection between the bread of life at the end of a life, and “a little child shall lead them”—lead them into the future -- a little child shall feed them.

I looked at those grandchildren, and I look at our own grandchildren, and yours, and I pray -- “There is a boy here,” and there is a girl, whose generation may just save the planet. What can we do now to help them? Besides sit back and complain.

Here’s a story by Rabbi Harold Kushner:

“I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sand castle by the water’s edge, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing, and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody’s hand to hold will be able to laugh.”

Finally, I have a coffee mug I use every morning, and these words on it never fail to hit me:

“One hundred years from now,

It will not matter what my bank account was, The sort of house I lived in,

Or the kind of car that I drove. But the world may be different

Because I was important in the life of a child.”

“There is a boy here.” There is a girl. So let’s get on with it.