

Proper 17 C August 28, 2016

Really

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As most of you know, a group of parishioners and myself spent the first two days of class for OU this week standing in front of our church building giving away coffee and donuts. It was, in my opinion, an important thing for us as a parish to do. I even switched my day off around just so I could participate. I wanted to join in the initiative because I enjoy going out into the community and I was curious to see what would happen.

A lot happened both mornings. Of course we gave away all the donuts. But giving away the donuts was not the goal. Most of the people who were out and about passed us by, most of them politely, a few ignored us completely, and some made a point of going out of their way to avoid us.

Everyone who accepted our offer and took a donut or cup of coffee said thank you. A few gave us extra praise by calling us “awesome”, “kind”, or said we were the best part of their day.

Two or three paused long enough to ask us what kind of church we are, and asked what the Episcopal Church is, listened, and responded. These were enjoyable conversations.

One or two stayed with us a while, talking with us about how their day was going.

A few asked if we wanted their contact information. Or donations. We said no, we just wanted to give them coffee and donuts because we wanted them to have a good start to the new school year.

Several asked us a very important question. They asked us why we were really giving away coffee and donuts. I noticed they didn't just ask why we were doing what we were doing, they asked why we were 'really' doing what we doing. They didn't want an elevator speech or selling point, they wanted to know our motivation; they wanted to know what we wanted to get out of getting up early and spending two glorious mornings standing in front the church talking to whoever came by.

That is the type of question that can remind us why we spent the time and energy and resources the way we did. And if we hadn't thought much about it before, the question gives us the opportunity to reflect on what our motive really was. That is why it was my favorite question. Because it is so powerful and made me think and reflect on what really motivated me to participate in this event.

I can't tell you why the volunteers were willing to give up their time to do all the tasks necessary to make this event happen, you will have to ask them. I am sure they will be happy to talk about it. What I can tell you is why I did it.

I did it because I saw an opportunity for this parish to embody the ministry we talk about, the ministry that is mentioned during the prayers of the people every Sunday, and to be visibly present in the community. To be with the community that is all around us as it begins a new academic year, to walk with them, to let them know we are here, that we are more than our building, that we see them, we care, and we are offering something very different from what they might be used to. That something isn't really coffee and donuts. It is God's love, as we know it through Jesus' teachings, sacrifice, example, and most importantly, in his resurrection.

That is something that can't be bought, earned, or negotiated. It is simply, as unbelievable as it might sound, free.

That message is counter cultural in a world where everything has a price, and even certain behaviors are rewarded by promotion, scholarships, and grants. I'm not saying that is bad or wrong, I'm just saying it is different from what Jesus was teaching in our Gospel today, where once again we found Jesus attending a feast, a party, eating.

New Testament Scholar and former Bishop of Durham N. T. Wright often points out that Jesus shows us the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God is more like a party than anything else, as many of his parables involve banquets, celebrations, and feasts. For a parish like this one that has so many ways of feeding people, this perspective might encourage us to look deeper at why we are so fond of feeding ministries and why so many of our ministries and the way we embody our presence includes food.

At the party in today's Gospel Jesus used the opportunity to tell a rather strange parable about sitting in the wrong place and the embarrassment of being asked to move. In Jesus' day, where a person sat at events like wedding banquets was a big deal, and when the guest chose a seat for themselves it showed how

they saw themselves in their society or what they thought their host thought of them. Jesus parable seems to be more about the way things were at the time than they are about the Kingdom of God. It is what Jesus said after that that seems to sound more like what we expect to hear from him: that hosts should invite those who cannot pay them back to feasts and parties. These words from Jesus might just sound like Christian etiquette, but perhaps Jesus was telling this parable of being in the wrong seat and who hosts should invite in order to make his listeners pause and reflect on why they do what they do just like the question we were asked about why we were **really** giving away free coffee and donuts made me reflect on why we were really doing what we were doing.

It was a commonly held belief in Jesus' day that a person's place in God's Kingdom was earned based on how they lived, how well they followed the rules. For example, a person of high religious ranking would have been thought to be given a more important or higher place in God's Kingdom. But Jesus' teaching is suggesting such a mindset was of human invention, not God's intention. Jesus showed God loves and cares for the forgotten, the poor, the nameless and the oppressed the same as God cares for the popular, well to do, and powerful. Jesus' parable and teaching to the host is an opportunity to imagine how all persons can live into God's Love by changing their motivations for why they do what they do, as Jesus' challenged the host to throw a party for those who need to not only to eat, but to be included in the fellowship of community.

Jesus parable can be a comfort to us by reminding us in God's Love there is a place for all of us, even those of us who don't always feel like we fit, or aren't good enough, or don't measure up to expectations. It also reminds us that all of us can help bring that message of God's love to everyone, by what we say and what we do, who we invite, who we feed and why.

Shortly after this service, we will once again go outside our doors to be among the community around us. This time we are inviting the community to share a meal with us. Perhaps we'll experience responses to this invitation that were like what we saw on Monday and Tuesday. Perhaps we'll be passed by, perhaps people will join us, and maybe someone will ask us why we are really inviting them. If that happens how will you answer?

Because we've always done it? Are we hoping for new members? Are we looking for financial donations? Those are the type of answer that many people might be expecting to hear.

Or are we motivated to embody what we believe: that God is here in our midst, loving everyone; the frightened and the broken, the uncertain and the curious, the skeptic and the seeker, the generous and grieving, the homesick and the happy, those who think they already know their place and those whose hope is just to have a place that we all already have a place in God's kingdom where there is no jockeying for position – only a sharing of God's abundant love.