

Proper 11 in Year B, July 18, 2021
Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, GA
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During the summers while attending college, I worked as a barback, busboy, and finally as a waiter at a rather exclusive restaurant located on Longboat Key in Southwest Florida. Longboat is a beautiful Island just northwest of Sarasota and south of Anna Maria Island. I grew up in that area and became numb to the beauty that surrounded me every day. The restaurant was called the Buccaneer Inn. Five courses. Crystal stemware. Good lighting, ambiance, location, excellent service, people, food, and wine. Entrée costs were listed in terms of a certain number of doubloons and pieces of eight. When a customer asked how much an item was, we were coached to wait a few seconds staring the customer in the eye and then politely say: “Please allow me to get the manager who will explain.” The customer either then left or settled in to an unforgettable evening!

I loved working there. We wore modified pirate shirts and sashes and we all got along really well. I drove many a regular drunk home in his or her Beemer or Mercedes at closing. The Buccaneer Inn van would follow me and then take me back. One evening I was very fortunate to serve Lucille Ball and her entourage. She had a winter home on St. Armond’s Key just south of Longboat and was a wonderful and gracious guest.

Anyways. Being a waiter isn’t easy. It’s demanding work because you are trying to please your customers. And it’s my hypothesis that people get meaner and nastier in ever-escalating ways the hungrier and the drunker they get. One funny story:

Peg was a server there. She was a typical Floridian on the Island; she had leathery, tanned skin and wind tossed hair. She would lay out in the sun all day on Coquina Beach where her house faced the Gulf and then wait tables at the Buccaneer at night. No one messed with Peg. But if you knew her, you realized she had a heart of gold and was a top-notch worker.

One night, a particularly obnoxious man and woman began drinking Drambuie on the rocks. With his first drink he said to Peg: “Keep ‘em comin’ babe!” Peg knew then that she was in for some excitement. They first complained that their table was too near the kitchen so they were relocated. That table wasn’t clean enough so Peg wiped it down again. They asked how old the cloth was that she was using and was kind of bleach was used after every cleaning. The drinks weren’t coming fast enough and the wine was not the right temperature. Blah, blah, blah. They made it through the first few courses and then came the ribs and the baked potatoes. He said to Peg: “This is a baked potato. I asked for mashed potatoes. Get it right!” Peg stood there for a moment; she had had enough. She replied: “You want mashed potatoes?” “Yeah”. “Ok”.
(demonstrating) “Here ya’ go.”

The surrounding tables cheered Peg on! Of course, the manager was summoned. Their dinner was completely comped and they received a complimentary bottle of Drambuie. There are other stories, best told over cocktails.

In today’s Gospel, a lot of hungry people surround a tired group of disciples and an exhausted Jesus. Jesus wanted to hear the stories of his disciples regarding their teachings and healings and so he invited them to a peaceful time in a deserted hide-away. It is actually a very tender scene. But the crowds followed Him. They were hungry for his message of love, mercy, compassion, and his healing grace. And he did not turn them away because they were like sheep without a shepherd. There is much love is evident in this passage. Jesus began to teach them. This was open country away from it all. Good sense would dictate that Jesus would dismiss them early while there was still light by which to find their way to villages and towns where they could get something to eat and to drink. But Jesus kept on teaching and they kept on listening.

But they were human after all and I'm sure that their stomachs began to groan. Jesus suggested to the disciples that they supply the food. The disciples, cynical, tired, hungry, said in effect: "Right Lord. Good one! We have only 200 denarii, and you want us to feed this multitude? Get serious!"

And Jesus was just as serious as Peg was when pushed. Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and broke it. And broke it and broke it. And everyone was fed. And the grace and goodness found there ended up filling 12 food carrying baskets with left-overs.

All the Gospels report this signature event. With this marvelous meal, certainly something out of the ordinary happened. A multitude was fed spiritually and physically by a gracious and loving host in a beautiful, peaceful setting. The miracle of multiplication, at the very least, demonstrates that Jesus, as Lord, is the sustainer of life. His feeding of the masses expresses the deep, limitless love and compassion of God for the concrete concerns of those in need.

The early Church, in its eucharistic devotion and symbolism, recalled much more frequently than we this feeding by the lakeside. And the fun that I had at the Buccaneer Inn, the excitement and fun that 99.99% of the people who dined there had, the fun the early church had associating eucharistic meals with the miracle of the 5000 tells us something new. Namely, the Holy Eucharist is, of course, always associated with the Last Supper. That is a given. But, if we also allow ourselves to associate the Eucharist with the festive, celebrative spirit of the other times when Jesus broke bread with those he loved, we gain another perspective. We add an enjoyable, fascinating, mouth-watering, gustatory, exciting, fun-loving meal with a gracious host. In a beautiful setting, the sun has gone down, it is cool and the grass is plush, the food is plentiful, the company has been bonded in the teaching of the Lord, the whole thing well-

organized. It is a great success and a delightful occasion. In my mind it recalls a perfect evening at the Buccaneer with Peg as our server at her most gracious. It is a fun time where everybody feels like they have been treated with respect and dignity and they feel better, stronger, more alive.

The core of our liturgy takes us through the events of Holy Week and walks us through the dark streets of that memory. And always the beautiful liturgy then bathes us in the resurrection light of Easter; the strife is o'er, the victory won!

But. In our Eucharistic Liturgy, might we return to whatever restaurant we have been in in our lives that rendered an evening magical? That special place where the company is as passionate as the food and drink superb? Can't we return to that grassy hillside on a cool evening where Jesus nourishes us with Word and Sacrament? Can't we recall a meal where hungry people were surprised with goodness that brought smiles and laughter and contentment to their bellies and cheers to their lips? Because if we can, there may forever be a new song of thanksgiving in our hearts because of the revelation of the goodness and power of the Good Shepherd. Amen.