

“Trusting in a Free Lunch”

Date: 21 October 2018

Text: Mark 6: 30-44

Rev. Peter Coutts

One day my son Daniel accidentally startled one of those giant hares while walking through a playfield. The rabbit, believing Danny to be a threat, took off in fright and inadvertently ran right into a soccer goal. Undeterred by the netting, the rabbit launched himself like Superman to leap through a hole in the net, only to discover that his own circumference was larger than the hole in the netting. The hare got stuck. Danny said the rabbit hung there, suspended, maintaining the full Superman flying position for quite a while before it started to work at solving its problem. First, the rabbit tried to escape by giving his all to wriggling out of the net. When that didn't work, the rabbit next thought that playing dead was the best solution. So the rabbit went completely limp, hoping Danny would simply walk away, uninterested. A simple parable of life. All of us at times face different threats and traps we want to escape. No amount of wriggling and effort can save us in some situations. We may even resort to ignoring the situation in the hope that our troubles would all blow past. How does Jesus meet us in these needs?

Jesus had a big need himself that day. His cousin John the Baptist had just been executed – beheaded – by Herod. John's followers buried their mentor, and then went to tell Jesus. It hit Jesus hard. As he often did, he responded by taking some time out from His ministry to go out to a deserted place to be alone with God: to mourn, pray, recoup. But the people, full of their own needs, seeing Jesus to be their answer, they tracked him down. And despite Jesus' own need in that moment, we read that “He had compassion for them and cured their sick”. Another small illustration of Christ's love and graciousness. People and their needs came before his own.

He kept it up all day. As evening came on the disciples began to worry about a different kind of need, for which they had a solution: “it's getting late and there is no food out here. Send the people away to the villages to buy dinner”. Their suggestion was incredibly practical and sensible, for the story tells us that there were 5,000 men, PLUS the women and children. It would be like people showing up at the Calgary Folk Festival without their picnic lunch or any food stalls around. Faced with this situation, the disciples were saying to Jesus: you can't take care of this kind of need, clearly. So let the people struggle with their own problems, to fix it or live with it. I'm sure some were even thinking, hey – if they came out here unprepared, then it's their own fault they're hungry now. It's their net they are stuck in. The disciples thought Jesus' answer was insane. He said, “no, you can feed them”. I can see their jaws dropping. They would have stared at Jesus, stared at the massive crowd, stared down at their meager provisions, and then stared again at Jesus. “But all we have is five loaves and two fish!” He ignored their protest. Instead, Jesus told the crowd to sit down and wait. Dinner was coming.

First I want to focus on the crowd's reaction: they sat and waited. I have no idea where the crowd thought this meal was going to come from – how many truckloads would it take? But 10,000 or so

people sat down and waited, expectantly. When Jesus said “sit down”, He was also saying “trust me”. And they did trust Him. When Jesus said “sit down”, He was asking them to wait upon Him, patiently. And apparently they were patient: you can’t feed that kind of crowd in a hurry, and we have no report of a riot. Eventually, in time, the huge crowd ate and were satisfied.

When we are tied up in our nets, can Jesus come to us in our need? We believe yes. Jesus invites us to receive from Him. He said, “Come unto Me, all of you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest”. As we read in the Psalms, “Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain You”. But we learn four things from the crowd in this story: we have to be willing to turn to Jesus with our need (that is, to go out and meet Him in the desert place of our own lives); we need to respond with trust to His invitation to help (that is, we have to sit down); we have to be patient (that is, stay sitting down, waiting); and we have to know satisfaction when we’ve received His help (that is, take and enjoy what we’ve received).

I don’t think any of these things is easy for us to do. For many of us our tendency is to focus all our efforts on wriggling out of our own problems. It is so easy for us to be functionally agnostic: thinking we are on our own to solve our own problems. We can, in essence, say what the disciples were saying to Jesus: “this need is beyond you”. So we don’t turn to God in help. In a world that breeds cynicism, turning in trust to God can be hard... especially if we think God hasn’t come through for us in some way in the past as we hoped God would. Once burned, twice shy. In times of struggle and pain, patience can be a virtue, but it can be the hardest virtue. And, in the end, we want our satisfaction to arise from the fix we want from God, not necessarily from the one we receive. Yes, in life, too often we find ourselves “weary and heavy laden”. But in so many different ways we find a way to not give God the opportunity to give us that promised rest.

But let’s learn from the crowd that day. The disciple’s first solution was probably in the mind of the crowd as well: “yep, it’s getting late and we’re hungry. Time to leave to find the closest Tim Horton’s”. But when Jesus asked the crowd to sit down, they thought “OK, we’ll give you a chance here”. And they sat. That’s all he asks of us. Give him that chance. Believe. Their response, as well as ours, when our need is taken to our Lord, is always an act of faith on our part. It is an act of faith to go, saying “This is my burden that makes me weary and heavy laden”. It is an act of faith to trust in him to respond to our need. It is an act of faith to wait patiently for his response. It is an act of faith to do it time and time again, even if at times we do not feel the satisfaction of Jesus’ help.

But let’s think of that too in the reaction of the crowd. Thousands.... thousands went out to the desert that day. In a crowd that huge, not all would have their ailments healed. Not all would be comforted. Not all would receive a word from Jesus. Heck: not all would even hear or see him! So many of the needs would have gone unmet, so many hopes for that day would fade. But they all had one common need: they were hungry. And when Jesus said “sit down” they did. They expressed that act of faith, and waited. And those meager provisions fed the multitude, with more to spare. It’s a good reminder to us. Our Reformed theological heritage has all doctrine start with one assertion: “God is Sovereign”. God knows, God responds, God gives. It’s about God, not us and what we want. Likely the needs that drove so many to the desert were not met. But for a person who went, they could still come away saying, “But

he helped me. I was also hungry, and he made provision for me.... for me...!" Recognizing the small blessing from God can still appear like a miracle to us, and how affirming for our faith that would be?

As we read in the Psalms, "Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain You". This idea from the psalms does not say "rescue you" but "sustain you". A significant distinction. For the majority of people there that day, that is the help they received. The need that drove them there, for most, was not fixed. But, through the provision of food, their lives were sustained in the most basic of ways. As people of faith, we need to appreciate the way God does this for us as well.

So what did happen to that rabbit? Mad wriggling didn't help free it. Playing dead didn't make Danny go away. The need and the trap were still very real. Danny walked over to the soccer goal and shook the net a bit, and the rabbit fell out, free to get on with its life. Danny did nothing more than shake the net. I wonder if this is what God does for us? For some of us there may be occasions when something happens that may seem to us monumentally miraculous, and praise God for that! But I wonder if most of the time God is just there, watching, knowing, understanding.... occasionally giving a little a little shake to help when needed. If we saw those moments, wouldn't that sustain us? So let us sit, wait patiently, see the help for what it is, and be thankful. Those moments will bring you peace (another word for "rest"), and they will sustain you the next time.