

Brushed with grace

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, July 31, 2011, The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 14:13-21.*

Well, it is official. We are in the dog days of summer: ridiculously hot, sultry days, days historically associated with, as one has put it, a "dull lack of progress." Our esteemed Congress has decided this year to provide us a Technicolor, in-our-face example of the dog days at their most dullard-like best. This morning there seems to be renewed hope for action this afternoon. Being in the hope business, I shall—hope. It seems impossible today to avoid mentioning this astonishing predicament. Should we ignore it, we would be as guilty as our critics charge: that we use our faith practice as an escape. At this point, though, one might ask, "Who could blame us?" Escaping seems like a great idea.

But, of course, we can't. Not really. We may not be able to do much about it, but escaping from it is not possible, no matter how attractive the notion appears. As faith people, we are not granted the option of remaining disinterested or interested in only how public policies affect us. Though only slightly credal when it comes to doctrine, we in our little end of the religious world adhere to a high calling as it relates to others. We make extraordinary promises, like vowing that we shall uphold the dignity of all human beings. That pretty much ends our hopes of remaining calm, disinterested, or only self-interested.

In his op-ed piece on Friday, Paul Krugman made a passionate argument against centrism in an article titled, *The Centrist Cop-Out*. Those who love him whistled a happy tune; those who do not love him quite unsurprisingly opined that Mr. Krugman need never worry about being called a centrist, discounting his diatribe, as they saw it, as predictably partisan and hopelessly leftist. Joe Scarborough on *Morning Joe* concluded it is the same article Paul Krugman has written for seventeen years.

My own political leanings notwithstanding, I found his comments to be, quite unintentionally I am sure, theologically intriguing, intriguing because they led me down a path of examining my own centrist tendency, the considered way in which I value the capacity and willingness to see the middle way. Those of you schooled in Anglicanism immediately hear that buzzword, the middle way, the *via media*. Deeply rooted in our consciousness as Anglicans is the belief that there is great power in the *via media*.

It is a notion that lies at the heart of who we are. We are tastefully disdainful of extremists of any variety. Though officially the first, we are both Protestant and Catholic, both high and low, bound to scripture and tradition but also their critics by virtue of our reliance upon reason. We delight in, perhaps are even haughty about, ambiguity; and I love it—all of it. It is for me the only way to be religious, about the only way I can believe.

But these characteristics, so cherished by us, do result in some claiming that we are inherently wishy-washy, wondering, as they do, if we in fact stand for anything. Joseph Fletcher, the father of situation ethics, was after all an Episcopal priest on his way to atheism. Though I wholeheartedly ascribe to the classical theory that our willingness to live in the gray middle is indeed part of our genius and the root of what has kept us together all these years to the extent that we have remained together, I do sometimes grow weary of our lack of definitude. But no matter how hard I try, I find that I too have a shrinking list of absolutes: "This is always that, and that is always this," more often than not replaced with "Life is both and."

It is indeed ponderous, and you are perhaps wondering what any of this has to do with today's gospel. A great deal I think. Those of us who grew up doing such things have heard this gospel story all our lives, the feeding of the 5000. It is beloved of children, and why wouldn't it be: Jesus the Action Figure in a fantastical moment of mass production before their eyes? I used to imagine how that was done, only slowly coming sadly to realize that I no longer believed such to be likely and even more slowly coming to see happily once again that its point remains quite true long after dismantling its literal details.

Homiletically, the story has many powerful points:

- Jesus' great example of regularly stepping aside for quiet and contemplation;
- His willingness to have that quiet interrupted by the very real needs of those in search of him;

- His refusal to send the multitude away hungry, signifying an absolute for him: hunger is not God's plan for God's children;
- The possibility that the miracle was in fact a general and viral sharing among those there of what they had; world hunger experts tell us that it is not the lack but the distribution of food that lies at the root of global hunger;
- The powerfully Eucharistic overtone of the story, its claim about abundance and goodness, a truth enacted every Sunday here as we confess our spiritual hunger at a table of abundance and grace.

All good and worthwhile points that many others of my ilk and I have preached about through the years.

But today what strikes me more than anything else is the poignancy and vitality with which Jesus lived his life. Far from a centrist, he took sides every time.

I am careful here. Once someone accused me of making Jesus sound like a liberal Democrat. If my memory serves, and I am certain it does, he was not complimenting me—or the Jesus he thought I had concocted. In the halcyon days of my youth, I may have been guilty as charged; but let me be clear: my own growing cynicism about the political process (perhaps the inevitable offshoot of aging) has now rendered me more a general skeptic than a lingering partisan.

Just as well. As Christians, our calling is to much more than one party over another, even one country over another. At its most basic level we are to be about emulating the life of Jesus, admittedly not a simple process but a clear calling. “To follow me,” he said, “be like me; love like me.” I have a great friend and parishioner in Jackson, who once said to me just after hearing me teach a class, “I am totally comfortable talking about God, but this Jesus stuff gets on my nerves. I think you ought to dial that back a little.”

I understand her issue. Jesus was not a comfortable centrist. In our vernacular, he called it as he saw it. When the religious folks dragged the adulterous woman before him, he told her to change her life; but his disdain was reserved for the obnoxiously pious. Mercy, he taught, always trumps clarity of the law. Again and again where the less fortunate were concerned, there was no place for the middle road: when people were hungry, they needed to be fed, members of the tribe or not, clean or unclean; when the sick were in need of healing, they were to be healed no matter how tired he and his followers were; when prisoners were alone, they were to be visited; when the poor were made invisible by the culture, they must be shown in a bright light.

No comfortable middle for us, his followers, our response is to be clear, non-nuanced, and direct. It is not easy—and I miss the mark most of the time, but it is not unclear. Politics aside, we are by definition of the name we claim always on the side of the disenfranchised. How we live that out in terms of our personal politics is personal and no real concern of mine, save for my own.

So this story, once seen as charming, even if outlandish, now morphs into a serious teaching about Jesus' ethic of life. Philosophically, yes even on occasion politically, and for sure theologically, it is fine, often perhaps wisest, to be centrist. But when it comes to the living of our lives, centrism is a weak and wearisome response to the abundance for which we are intended. In the sense that I am using the word centrism now, I think of it as a synonym for pragmatism. In many ways, I am dreadfully and successfully pragmatic; getting things done is terribly important to me, and the most pragmatic way is often the way to go.

But I don't want to live quite so pragmatically, no more than absolutely necessary, and I certainly don't want to love or hope or dream pragmatically. This gospel points to life that is the antithesis of pragmatism. The disciples pragmatically and quite rightly admonished Jesus to send these scores of people home, a sensible conclusion. But what joy would have been missed by them all: the joy, I believe, of sharing resources with one another, laughing and talking as people who together created a great bounty in this “miraculously” concocted meal, brought forth not out of thin air but out of generous hearts: a love meal indeed.

And the story continues. Through thick and thin, through times of peace and times of war, through strong and weak economies, when the government works and when it doesn't, we gather to allow this weekly brush with Grace to give us the strength not only to survive life but to live it joyously and generously.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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