

Remember the old saying, “Never look a gift horse in the mouth?”

Seems to me that most of society has forgotten that phrase. Gifts are scrutinized, evaluated, measured, sometimes even deconstructed in order to get at what they might mean to the receiver.

To a certain extent, this behavior reminds me of the Native American Indian tribe of the Pacific Northwest and their potlatches. Potlatches are rituals of gift-giving whereby there is reciprocation — one person or family — even whole villages — give and receive gifts. In its most benign form, potlatch is a wonderful opportunity to mutually share gifts. At its most malignant, it can pauper individuals, families, and villages as one-upmanship and greed and pride push the giver to give gifts that are not affordable, that threaten the life of the giver, and that bring ruin, even death.

While that sounds extreme, our Gospel reading led me to thinking about how the Pacific Northwest Indians and their gift-giving is contrasted with how God gives us gifts. As we just heard, Jesus engages the crowds in understanding the feeding of the multitudes. The crowd, wanting more, doesn't get the meaning of the bread and fish. Their take is visceral, immediate — give us bread to eat. Also, the crowd equates the receiving of food with work. They follow the world's dictum that nothing is free — if one has received something, then something must be given in return (again, the potlatch mentality).

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The problem with that is the confusion of what the something in return is. The crowd thinks the response is work — you know, the ordinary, everyday 9 - 5 type work (okay, in Biblical times it was more like from sunup to sundown). They don't get it that Jesus is saying that the proper response to the gift of bread is belief — in Jesus and in God.

We have a tough time wrapping our minds around this teaching, too. Part of our religious tradition is to separate work from belief. We see works-

righteousness as a bad thing — like the potlatch, it can become malignant. But, here Jesus points us toward a work that is not a burden but is life itself. Like the crowds, we often come to Jesus looking for security. We think that the security comes from material, utilitarian, and pragmatic means —in short, bread. Instead, Jesus calls us to transcend and transform our lives so that the “work” we do is the work of God’s Kin-dom.

A bit of speculation leads me to see that the crowd doesn’t quite get what Jesus is telling them. They ask for a sign like their ancestors did with Moses by providing manna in the desert during the Exodus. But, as our Old Testament passage recalls, and Jesus gently reproves, it is God who provides. And again, the gift God provides includes an invitation to live and work in God’s kin-dom.

Do we accept the invitation? Or, do we keep up an addiction and dependence on the quick-fix, the crowd-pleasing, sensational show like having water turned into wine, feeding thousands with 5 loaves and 2 fish, healings of sight, hearing, mobility, like all the miracles Jesus performed?

Perhaps you’ve noticed the parallel of our passage today with the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well. She asked for water that never ran out. Jesus responds by telling her that He is the Living Water. As our reading ends today, John the gospel-writer ties the two together as Jesus is quoted “I am the bread of life. Anyone who comes to me shall not hunger; anyone believing in me shall never thirst.”

Here we have assurance: here is the security we long for. But, another caution: while the passage serves a single purpose — to point to Jesus as the way to God, such a focus can lead to a myopic view which is rather sectarian — loyalty to the leader at all costs; his is the only way, independent of issues of substance. Everyone else is wrong.

Such a viewpoint can actually block our relationship with God. Instead of being open to the richness and fullness of living and working in God’s Kin-dom, one is busy figuring out who is in and who’s out. It becomes a cult of the leader, rather than a dynamic, loving relationship with God in Jesus. It keeps us from understanding faith as the always precious and surprising

keeps us from understanding faith as the always gracious and surprising gift of God.

It is with such faith and belief that we approach the Table. Here when we gather around it, we enact the meals Jesus shared with the multitudes, with His disciples, with those down through the ages. The bread and cup are metaphor and reality, symbol and sign.

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When we partake of the elements, we share in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. And, here, we can also see that Jesus is the true gift of God. So that, as such, we approach the Table with thanks.

Let us pray: Holy and gracious God, You give us so many gifts, so many blessings. As we approach Your Table this morning, let our hearts be filled with gratitude, our minds humbled by Your love, our hands and hearts readied to work in Your Kingdom. Let us be renewed with the true bread of heaven and the living water of the Kingdom; so that we are satisfied with all Your gifts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen