

Sermon, Eric Carr, Nov. 13, 2011

O Gracious Light
O Word of Truth
May my words be yours
And may our hearts all be open and soft
To receive everything you have for us today.
Amen.

Two and a half years ago I had it all. My partner and I had just celebrated our sixteenth anniversary. I was surrounded by friends and family. I had just emerged with new vigor and excellent health after being seriously ill for ten months. I lived in a beautiful home on a nature preserve. I was excited about putting my practice back together after almost a year of not being able to work, and I was still getting pretty good residual income from past recording, writing, and production contracts too. My partner's business was doing very well after he had followed a business plan I had put together for him a couple years earlier. I was planning a trip to Japan and imagining all the ways I would savor my wonderful life now that I had conquered my illness to regain my health and vitality. I was extraordinarily happy.

Then I got a letter from Discover saying that I had been randomly selected for a rate increase as part of their plan to deal with the economic crisis. Incensed, I called and explained that I had perfect credit and no late payments in my eleven year history of using Discover, and their reply was something to the effect of, "Well, Mr. Carr, we can put your credit back to our platinum rate, but I'm showing that your whole balance is in cash advances anyway, and the interest rate on cash advances is 24.9 percent."

As they started listing the charges, a wave of heat started in my chest and spread over my body as my throat closed, my world started spinning, and my denial conflicted with reality. I could ignore a lot, but hearing that I had seventeen thousand dollars in cash advances - all secretly put on my card by my partner - forced me to look at the cracked facade of my perfect little life.

What was under those cracks would change my life forever.

While I was ill, my partner took care of the finances, and I trusted him blindly. Unfortunately that trust had been exploited. Instead of going to work and school, my partner had been coping with a bevy of setbacks by relapsing into multiple addictions after eleven years of sobriety. And the seventeen thousand was just the tip of the iceberg. Over the holidays I trusted my partner when he said we qualified for a super-low interest rate on my mortgage - but supposedly, since I was ill the mortgage broker said I needed to sign a quit-claim deed and give my partner ownership of the house. It turns out that he took out a second mortgage, and so over a hundred thousand dollars in equity vanished without me even knowing it. We had been living just like we had when we had a lot of extra money, but while I thought my partner's business was

thriving, he actually wasn't even working, but was instead spending his time and our money on alcohol, drugs, and well, let's just say it's a miracle I didn't catch anything.

When I reached out to my friends and family, most of them judged me, telling me that God was punishing me for leaving my ministry a few years earlier. I heard lots and lots of stories about a God that sounded an awful lot like the hard and harsh master in today's Gospel reading, and I definitely felt like I was thrown out into the outer darkness with all the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. It felt like even that which I had, had been taken away.

Three years prior to that I had abandoned my post as the head of a large international ministry and overseer for a network of Evangelical churches in the Charismatic movement, because I started to question my faith and beliefs. Now, a few years later and in the midst of the worst personal crisis of my life up to that point, I was fully agnostic, thinking that if there was a God, I wasn't very sure I wanted to know him. I was at a spiritual rock bottom.

In desperation, I went back to the second and third steps I had learned so many years earlier in a recovery program for codependents. I was desperate to carve out some kind of spirituality, so I tried everything. I meditated at a local Buddhist temple, embraced the quirky beliefs of my New Age friends, and went to churches, meetings, workshops, and services all over Tucson. But all the meditation and crystals and spirit quests did little to bring me back to where I had once been. As much as my faith had crumbled when I left Evangelical Fundamentalism, I was desperate for something real and tangible to cling to.

Like the Israelites facing Sisera's great army, I needed to hear the voice of God.

I needed a Deborah in my life to speak to me, so I cried out to God to speak to me however God could. I wish I could say that life instantly got better, or that I quickly found a spiritual home. That's not how it worked. It took another year of painful searching and diligent self examination to discover that deep down inside, with all my Buddhist leanings and new appreciations for the subtleties of New Age mysticism, in my heart of hearts, I really was a Christian, and what I really wanted was the connection to Jesus I had once enjoyed so fervently.

As a child I knew Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. As a minister in the Charismatic movement it was more like Jesus was my husband, and we were madly in love. Here at my lowest, it was time for my relationship with Christ to mature again into one that was still personal, but finding its greatest manifestation in community.

Somehow, implausibly, my life got even more challenging. I found my beloved mother-in-law dead and floating face down in the bathtub, suddenly and shockingly losing the only family member I had on this side of the country. I lost my thriving teahouse at the Botanical Gardens due to political decisions there. I was badly injured when my car was totaled. My new book contract fell through when my publisher got cancer. I got

kicked out of the house I was renting when my landlord fell into mental illness. I had major bills that far outweighed my continually decreasing income. Basically, I got to the point where I could no longer do it on my own. If I was going to survive, I was going to have to ask for help for the first time in my life.

Looking back on all of that now, I wonder what would have happened in the parable of the master and his talents had the servants worked together. In my understanding of the parable, the third servant didn't really know the master or his companions. Had the master really been cruel and harsh? Had he really tried to reap where he did not sow? It wasn't like he was making the servants invest their own money. I don't think that servant really knew his master, and it seems very clear from his actions that he wasn't acting in community either. And he never asked for help. Instead of thinking of how to do good, or how to build something greater, his worldview focused on scarcity, on protecting what little he had, and so he ended up losing it all. I believe the story would have ended very differently had the servants worked together.

Immediately after Matthew's account of this parable, Jesus goes on to explain more about it. He speaks of a time when the Son of Man will come in glory, separating the people out like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He then explains that the good and faithful servants are the ones who helped those in need. "For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me with help and ministering care, I was in prison and you came to see Me." Most of us know the rest of the story. "Truly I tell you," Jesus said, "in so far as you did it for one of the least of these My brethren, you did it for Me."

That is the very essence of living into the Gospel. That is what it means to be the church. And that was what I experienced when I finally asked for help. I got to meet Christ through community. At my lowest point, at my most desperate, God showed up for me in a multitude of faces, many of whom are here today.

There is no doubt that the world is in a time of crisis in so many ways. Many of us are taking these crises as opportunities to reach out in even greater ways, allowing God to show us new ways to create abundance, stretch our faith, and serve an ever-growing need as more and more people face their own crises. There is a strength in our numbers empowering us to do far more as a community than we could ever hope to do as individuals. And not one of us needs to be left out of that mission!

A few weeks ago many of us heard Holly Shinn talk about creative ways we can be a community of support to those suffering lack. One of the things she mentioned was the fact that food stamps don't cover things like toiletries, so those little soaps and free bottles of shampoo from your hotel rooms all of a sudden become premium items to someone in need, and a valuable addition to our outreach. A community garden becomes an inexpensive way to nourish people with fresh, wholesome foods while building community and reducing our carbon footprint. I know someone who tithes on his monthly food stamp allocation by giving ten percent of his groceries to a local food

bank. The possibilities to make a difference are truly endless, and are not limited by scarcity. The key is to ask God for wisdom and then listen for God's voice.

When we hear people urge us to "prayerfully consider" giving to a particular ministry, there is a lot of wisdom in that. Prayerfully considering something really does require us to pray...and listen. That's when we get these inspired ideas. That's when we know how to be faithful with the resources God has given us.

Deborah didn't go out to battle thinking Sisera would end up staked to the floor with a tent peg. As gruesome as this story is now, and as much as I don't like to glorify war or violence, this is a great example of the kind of implausible, unexpected, out-of-the-box thinking that happens when we open ourselves up to letting God manifest through us in ways we may not have thought of on our own. As it was, a Kenite nomad woman named Jael allied with the Israelites and became the final vanquishing force in the epic battle. It was not a sword or spear or an army that brought forty years of peace to the land, but a woman with a rug and a tent stake.

Would any of that have happened if the people hadn't been praying together and then obediently following what they believed to be the direction of God? Would they have even had the courage to go out before the state-of-the-art war machines had they not had powerful prophetic leadership under Deborah? And just as Deborah had to be there to encourage the troops and their leaders, so too do we need to encourage and admonish each other. The very next verses of today's passage in I Thessalonians say, "Now also we beseech you, brethren, get to know those who labor among you, appreciate and respect them all. Be at peace among yourselves. And we earnestly beseech you, brethren, admonish those who are out of line; encourage the timid and fainthearted, help and give your support to the weak souls, and be very patient with everybody."

We really do need each other!

I now know that part of my self-care is having some form of fellowship with my fellow saints. I need it, and it keeps me grounded, keeps me encouraged, and often keeps me humble. It also connects me to the Spirit, gives me opportunities for service, allows God to move through me in more varied ways, and reminds me that I am a strand in a much, much larger plan. My gifts, my talents, so to speak, are amplified when added to the exponential power of community. Wherever two or more are gathered, Jesus is here among us, and at the risk of sounding a little too Evangelical, everyone really could use more Jesus in their lives. The arrogant and overly religious could use the Jesus who hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors. The sick could use the Jesus who healed with his words and touch. The shameful need to see the Jesus who forgave the people who crucified him even as they stood there mocking him and spitting on him. The hungry need to see the Jesus of the loaves and fishes, and the one percent we hear so much about these days need to see the Jesus who overturned the money tables in the temple.

I know I need to see Jesus. These past few years have brought constant upheaval, loss, and change, some wondrous, some horrific, and I have needed to see Jesus calm the storms of my life again and again and again. Many times that Jesus has shown up in the chapel during meditation, or downstairs during Healing Touch clinics, or on Sundays during powerful and meaningful liturgies that speak to me on so many levels, or in sermons that lance my heart with purpose, hope, and truth.

And sometimes That Jesus shows up in someone's hug during the peace. Or sometimes He shows up in a phone call right when I need it, or an offer for help, or in a word of wisdom, or an opportunity to exercise a spiritual gift in ministry here.

And sometimes the Jesus I encounter here is the one carrying the cross, or thirsty, or hungry, or tired - the least of these He said are Him.

Psalms 34 says that God is close to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. It then says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but God delivers him out of them all." We are going to face afflictions. It is part of life. And sometimes it seems like afflictions are the biggest part of life. But God delivers us out of them all, and the way God often does this is in community. We see it throughout the entire Bible. Sometimes the community may only be a couple of people, and sometimes it may be the entire church sharing all it has in common, but God uses our intrinsic need for connection to forge new ways of living into abundance.

We are transformed together, and we need each other in this transformation. Community is our chrysalis, and also our witness. In II Corinthians 3 Paul says, "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation (our credentials), written in your hearts, to be known and read by everybody. You show and make obvious that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts"

When I look back at the last few years and how I lost almost everything, and then slowly put my life back together, finding purpose, strength, and hope again - largely because of my faith community - I think about how my life becomes a living witness. I become that living letter Paul talks about here. I become like the servant who invests in a way that brings increase and more blessing, because people see the change in me. And that's what happens when injured people see a church that embraces outcasts, when hungry people find a generous pantry, when a nation of dwindling and dying churches sees a vibrant and growing community like ours. God's love and abundance shine most brightly when contrasted with the pain and darkness they transform.

We are the way that God most often moves in the world! Just among us here today, we have more answers to prayers than we can even imagine, and we have more capacity and potential for manifesting God and living into the Gospel than we could dare to dream! That is the gift of community, and that is the treasure with which God has entrusted us. Will we be faithful with it? Will we be open to the Spirit moving in and with and among us? Will we be obedient to follow through when God stirs in our hearts

to give or serve or love - even when it is scary or challenging or inconvenient or extravagant?

Conversely, are we willing to lay down our pride and ask for help when we need it too? Just as Christ is in us when we heal the sick and feed the poor and visit the lonely, Christ is also in us when we are the sick and when we are the poor and when we are the lonely.

As Ecclesiastes beautifully points out, there are times and seasons of lack and sometimes there are seasons of abundance. Sometimes we experience those communally, and sometimes we suffer lack while those around us reap increase. Whatever season we may be in as a church, as individuals, as families, God is there with us. As the Scripture says, By the power at work within us, God does more than we could dare ask or imagine. Are we open to it? Will we let ourselves be what we see and receive what we are? Will we, as individuals and as a community, live into the calling God has placed on us day to day, moment by moment, being sober and vigilant, open to the voice and provision of God wherever it may be?

As I was preparing this sermon, gathering ideas and notes, pondering the message I thought maybe God wanted us to hear, I started writing a poem. About ten minutes later this is what I had:

We are one body
Because we all share in the one bread
Though the bread may be manifold
In the way it comes to us

The bitter bread of suffering
Or the tender loaves of passion
The rough and ruddy bread of toil
Or sweetened cakes of joy
The bread dipped in the fatness of prosperity
And bread soaked with the wine of tears

Our bread is both here on this altar
And in our hearts
It is both on our lips
And before our eyes
Both in our hands
And under our feet

We are the body
We are the bread to the hungry

You and I are salt and light
The sweet fragrance of Christ

Unto the world
And the ones through whom God loves
And gathers

You and I are Christ to the nations
The dispensers of His glory
The oracles of wisdom and words that heal
Love letters scripted by the Holy Spirit
Delivered in and among and through humanity

We are the ones who stand in the gap
When no one else is found

We are the evidence of God's love
The prophets of our age
And the world's healing balm
As we create the kingdom come
And God's will being done
On earth
As it is in heaven.

We are the daily bread
Given this day
And every day we live in Christ

Rise up, beloved!
Take on your mantle
And walk as the body of Christ
Risen
Glorious
And strong
Humble and meek
Loving and kind
Full of miracles
And challenges
Creating abundance with simple loaves and scraps of food
Creating communities with zealots and tax collectors
Prostitutes and priests
Creating hope
In a world writhing in despair

That's you!
You do not have to be Moses
To free a people enslaved
Or Joseph to feed the hungry
In times of lack

You do not have to be Elijah
To stand up to oppressive rulers
Or Paul to take the Gospel
To those abandoned by the church
You do not have to be Mary
To bring Christ incarnate to the world
You just have to be the one that God calls you to be
Part of one body
As we all share in one bread

The very bread of heaven
Rises in you, in us together,
And so Christ
Rises again and again
Moment by moment
With each step you and I take
With every word we share
With every touch we give
With every meal we serve
With every breath we pray

Therefore let us keep the feast
And make the feast
And share it
Share it with each other
Share it with the world
So in turn,
The world may come to Him
Who is the source of all joy
The spring of all hope
And the power at work within us
In ways we cannot even yet imagine
Beyond what we can even ask

When together we become the body
When together we become the bread

Amen