

“YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT.”

Sermon 869

August 3, 2014

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

957th Week as Priest

783rd Week at St Dunstan's

48th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Many of you know that my first cure of souls was St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Fayette, a town of 5,200 people located in northwest Alabama, 43 miles north of Tuscaloosa. Fayette was just about in the absolute middle of nowhere, but we came to believe with the local folks that it was the Hub of the Universe.

St. Michael's was a beautiful little church, actually constructed in large measure by the parishioners themselves, with the priest, Mark Johnston (of Camp McDowell fame) as their general contractor and day-to-day foreman. From the stone foundation, laid by the Episcopal Church Women; to the chancel and altar, built

by a cabinetmaker in the congregation; to the painting and flooring, both large group efforts, that holy place was literally “the work of the people.” The church was completed in 1982.

There is always a danger when a church engages in a construction project to let the building—the work, the process, the challenges and problems, and the end result—become the entire focus of the congregation. Some never get over it, and become idolatrous in their love for the brass and silver, wood and brick, color and curve of the structure. Not so with the people of St. Michael’s in Fayette—and no so with you, the people of the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany in Tallassee.

In 1993, we returned to Fayette and I read for holy orders. The city of Fayette is rather well-to-do, but the county has suffered for decades from crime and corruption, population decline, and the closing of several key industries.

During that three-year period, St. Michael’s and my bank partnered with the county to begin a rural recycling center.

We also joined hands with the Methodists and Catholics to start an outreach program called “The Christian Center of Concern.” I was ordained in 1996, and by that time, the recycling program was given a state award, and the food pantry had outgrown its location. By then, we were feeding about 50 families a ton of food on the last Wednesday afternoon of every month. Sound familiar?

That same year, we applied to the United Thank Offering for a grant of \$20,000 and miraculously received the full amount! There was a house located next door to my new bank building, and it was for sale. The Methodists chipped in \$10,000 and Father Pete from Holy Family Catholic Church came up with \$20,000 from his diocese and another \$10,000 from his religious order. We bought the house, named it the Christian Center of Concern, and painted and patched it up in record time.

By the last Wednesday afternoon of the next month, we had a hundred families gathered in the front yard, the back yard, and parked in the bank parking lot.

(Banks in small towns in Alabama used to be closed on Wednesday afternoons, so our timing was perfect!)

That afternoon, Jesus came ashore and saw a great crowd. His heart was filled with pity for them, and he healed their sick. That evening his disciples came to him and said, “It is already very late, and this is a lonely place. Send the people away and let them go to the villages to buy food for themselves.”

“They don't have to leave,” answered Jesus. “You yourselves give them something to eat!”

“All we have here are five loaves and two fish,” they replied.

“Then bring them here to me,” Jesus said. He ordered the people to sit down on the grass; then he took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, and gave thanks to God. He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. Everyone ate and had enough. Then the disciples took up twelve baskets full of what was left over. The number of men who ate was about five thousand, not counting the women and children.

The Christian Center of Concern in Fayette continues to feed poor families from throughout the county—once every month, on the last Wednesday afternoon. Just like you, they buy their food from the West Alabama Food Bank, and they receive donations and gifts from their churches and congregations and generous individuals. They've been giving people something to eat for twenty years, and there is no end in sight.

Your Beans & Rice outreach ministry at Epiphany Church is doing the same. On the third Thursday of every month, Jimmy and Betty and Sam Jones and others go to the Montgomery Food Bank to buy food and bring it back here. They are met by others who help to stock the shelves and freezer. And on the third Saturday morning of every month you feed the multitudes! You give away a ton of food to the poor and the hungry—with your smiles and kind words and great compassion. It is hard and exhausting work, but it is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you understand the significance of this story? It is two thousand years old, and yet it lives anew—in the

power of our imagination, and the possibility of our minds, and the compassion of our hearts. It is only twenty years old, and yet it lives in an outreach program in a poor area of our own state. It is as new and fresh as the morning, and it lives here and now in the power of your imagination, and the possibility of your minds, and the compassion of your hearts.

You give them something to eat. Christ is not dead but alive!

You give them something to eat. You are his hands and feet.

You give them something to eat. You are a Gospel people, and my love and admiration for you fill my heart to overflowing!

You give them something to eat. Betty, Jimmy, Lee, Amanda, Eddie, Pam, you give them something to eat.

Jere, Pam, Sam, Barbara, Laura, Mike, Jim, Kara Shea, all of you, you are feeding the hungry—just as our Lord commanded us to do. May the Lord bless you and keep you all, now and forever more. **AMEN.**