

Pentecost 9, Proper 13
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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"They need not go away."

I remember being terribly annoyed with my younger sister, Carol. Many of you met here when she came to my installation here last year. The tension from this moment continued unabated—in fact, accentuated, all through school, and now, of course, in our older, wiser, years, we are best of friends, the crazy liberal edge of our family.

But the story I want to tell you about was once when the Tsachila among whom we lived invited us as a family to go fishing. Now the kind of fishing they did back then involved a toxic leaf that they would beat and then throw into a stream. The sap from the leaf turned the water green, and inhibited the fishes' capacity to absorb oxygen through the gills, forcing them to swim to the surface to gulp air in a state of semi-sedation. Scooping them up in small dipnets made for the purpose usually filled the larder for a few days of tasty fish.

On this occasion, my sister was still quite small, too young, in my educated opinion, to go on such an adventure. But my father intervened, and we had to tolerate her infantile distractions. At one point she began pointing into the shallows and calling for Dad. "What now?" I thought. Dad should be busy catching fish, not attending to the needs of this barely-past-toddler nuisance! But when my father looked over, there was the biggest fish of the day, lolling in the shallows, within easy reach.

Darn! Why hadn't Dad seen it? He's the father, the one who was finally responsible for us all. In our household, he was in charge of provisioning the household. Why hadn't I seen it first? I'm the older one who is capable of handling these kinds of situations. I'm (sorry, but boys in those days thought this way) I'm the boy, the budding outdoorsman, and she was just a girl. But, no, it had to be her, the one I didn't want to bring along.

Jesus tells the disciples this morning, "They need not go away." I can imagine how they were feeling, watching Jesus heal and teach all day long, watching with apprehension as the sun got closer and closer to the horizon, feeling their own hunger pangs, and knowing just how limited their own provisions were, wondering when this longwinded Jesus would wrap it up, and then one of them has the perfect way to break the spell. "Send them away to get something to eat." Hint: "We're starving!"

And Jesus says, "They need not go away." I can imagine the disciples had spotted the troublemakers among them. There was the Zealot who was bound to try to turn this into a riot against Rome. There was the batch of teens who were running around unattended. There was the self-righteous Pharisee sitting right over there, and a Samaritan, and a tax collector, and a home-wrecker woman from the next village over, and someone that Andrew knows secretly to be a Gentile who snuck in unnoticed. There is even a Roman soldier out there.

And in the face of them all Jesus says, "They need not go away; you feed them." Feed the Zealot. Feed the rowdy kids. Feed the Pharisee. Feed the Samaritan, the tax collector, the loose woman, the Gentile and the Roman soldier. Feed them all on the meager resources you have in your hands. Do not be afraid. They need not go away. Heavenly hospitality is radical. The only ones who walk away are those who choose to of their own free will, or the very, very few whose actions are just so toxic that their presence compromises the radical welcome of everyone else.

Jesus still says, "They need not go away," and as his followers, we say to the world, "You need not go away." There is a lot of "go away" being said in the world today. A lot of people look at the popular Black Lives Matter movement and say, "Go away." A lot of people look at police officers and say, "Go away." People are looking at members of another political party and saying, "Go away." There are still those who look at people with different skin, different culture or language and secretly wish they would just "go away."

"Go away" is a way of saying that the resources available aren't enough to go around, so, I am going to hoard my piece and not share, because I can't afford to suffer like that. Huddled over our paltry treasure, looking our shoulders in fear, and never at the actual treasure nor the faces around us is a devilish way to live, not heavenly at all. "Go away" forgets that Jesus is in our midst.\

"Go Away" is a divider, a splitter in the community. It creates "We and Them," where "We" are the real people and "Them" are somehow less than human. It loses sight of that great spiritual truth that we are all children of one God, and that the creation is a whole. It loses sight of what Richard Rohr calls the Unitive Vision. Ultimately, it is one's ego taking control and trying to run the world, and that always ends badly.

But Jesus IS here, and so with him we say, "They need not go away." Yes, they may believe differently than we, yes, they may support a different political party than we, yes, they may look different, talk differently, behave differently, but they need not go away. In fact, Jesus goes on to say, "You give them something to eat." You serve them. You give of what you have for them. You attend to their needs.

Now I know that we cannot save the world, and that our resources are limited, but we have evidence that perhaps they are not as limited as they seem. My wife has been sewing masks for the church's mask distribution program now for a good number of weeks. At first, she sorted through her own stash of material and used remnants that would work to make masks. Then she bought some extra elastic from a fabric and craft store downtown. Last week she went in there to buy material, and they offered her their remnants for \$1 apiece, and she made another 100 masks. This last week she went in and someone had dropped off a whole bag of remnants for her. Then someone from the church dropped off remnants from a quilting club.

Five loaves and two fish feed 5000 men, plus women and children, with 12 baskets of leftovers. We are not asked to explain how it happened; we are just asked to follow. The

economy of heaven is different than the economy of earth. With Jesus, we need not send them away, we can feed them. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

If we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration, then, whoever it is, they need not go away. We will give them something to eat.

Meditation questions:

- From whom do you wish you heard "You need not go away"?
- Who needs to hear these words from you today?
- How is St. Paul's saying these words? How are we not?
- What can we do about it?