
A Bowl of Gumbo and Half a Shrimp Salad Sandwich

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Proper 27 – Year A

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A bowl of gumbo and half a shrimp salad sandwich. A bowl of gumbo and half a shrimp salad sandwich. This was my father's favorite meal. And not just from anywhere. From Papa's Bar-B-Que and Seafood, outside of Savannah, Georgia.

Every time we went down to Savannah to visit dad, we would, with great pomp and circumstance, convene at Papa's, where we would sit in our accustomed booth, look over the menu with great intention, and, one by one, order a bowl of gumbo and half a shrimp salad sandwich.

I was recently in Savannah, though, when this meal turned out to be more than I had anticipated. I'd gathered with my siblings and my mother to clean out the house where she and dad had lived for more than 40 years. We spent the morning going through the house, deciding what would stay, what would go to mother's new place, and what we would throw away.

Did I mention 40 years? Nothing had left this house in 40 years.

And every piece of furniture had a story. There was an old metal toy stove in the basement that no one knew was there, but it had been in my grandmother's house.

We spent the morning becoming increasingly annoyed with each other. We spent the morning increasingly thinking thoughts about each other we had not harbored in a long time. We spent the morning saying things to ourselves we wouldn't say in the presence of another, biting our tongues more than once, and by the time we got to lunch, I was ready to come to Atlanta.

Well, we went to Papa's, we sat in our accustomed booth, we looked carefully at the menus because then we couldn't look at each other, and then, one by one, we ordered a bowl of gumbo and half a shrimp salad sandwich.

But unlike other meals, once the waiter left and we were left with just each other, we started looking around the room aimlessly, hoping that there would be someone that we knew we needed to get up and go talk to, maybe thinking the art which had been there for 30 years was suddenly interesting. Anything but having to talk to each other.

And then my sister, she said, "You know, Dad loved this place."

And everything changed.

Suddenly conversation emerged. We were able somehow to reengage. Everything that had happened during the morning was not forgotten, but somehow accepted. It was all just a bit more real.

And this is important, I think, because these moments, these decisions that we make, that come at us every single day are far more important than we think.

We are, I think, always on the path, with each decision we make, moving toward God or away from God.

But that decision, at that moment, allowed us to see the presence of Christ that was there, allowed us to feel the presence of God that was there, allowed us to reconnect, remember who we were as part of the body of Christ.

And so, you may wonder, where might you find guidance to make these decisions? And there is no shortage of suggestions.

Live every day as if it were your last.

Write your obituary.

Smell the roses along the way.

Follow your passion.

And all of these suggestions are good ones as far as they go.

But they're not always real. And they don't always draw us into being real.

The Parable of the Bridesmaids though, I think, goes a bit deeper. And I think it has something powerful to say to us about how we make these decisions.

On its face, the parable is simple enough: the bridegroom is away, presumably negotiating the marriage contract, and when that negotiation is completed, he will be coming home with his bride.

The bridesmaids are there, waiting, ten of them, having brought their lamps. But he is delayed. (You know how negotiations are.)

They all fall asleep. But when they wake up, hearing that he is on the road, that he's almost there, they light their lamps and realize that some brought extra oil and others did not—that some are described as wise and others are described as foolish.

The foolish ones, who did not prepare, predictably ask the wise ones to borrow some oil. Perhaps unpredictably, the answer is, "No. There's not enough for all of us."

And so the foolish ones are left to go to the dealers to purchase more oil, and while they are away the bridegroom comes, goes with the wise ones to the house, and when the foolish ones finally appear, they are rejected.

Our sense of Christian charity makes this uncomfortable, I think. It starts to look to us like a story of the haves and the have-nots, and why did the haves not share?

But I think that would miss the point.

The foolish ones did not prepare for the moment. But more importantly, the foolish ones did not understand the decision they were making.

Because when they left to go buy more oil, they were abandoning the community. When they left to go buy what they needed to maintain their status in the community, they missed the arrival of Christ. When they left to avoid the shame and embarrassment of having not prepared, they missed the moment that they were waiting for.

The message of the parable, I think, is that the decision we should focus on was not that of the wise bridesmaids refusing to share their oil. We are told they didn't have enough to honor the bridegroom when he returned and to light the lamps of the foolish.

It is instead, I think, the decision of the foolish not to admit their fault, the decision of the foolish not to stand in their error, the decision of the foolish not to wait for Christ.

Would Christ have turned them away then? If they were standing there in the dark, standing there advertising for all to see their lack of preparation, they would have been part of the community.

Would their sin have been redeemed?

It is our belief, of course, that the answer is “Yes,” that what was really required was not oil but honesty. What was really required was not a lamp that worked, but a person who believed. What was really required was to be real, to stand with the community, to acknowledge what you had not done, and trust and believe that you would be redeemed, that you would still be in the presence of Christ, that it would all work out in the end.

This is, I think, the difference between real community and false community. We can be in real community with each other, real relationship with each other, only to the extent we're really there, only to the extent we are honest, only to the extent that we drop our facades, our false selves, our story.

And that is what the bridesmaids refused to do, because, I suspect, they did not trust that they would be allowed to stay.

And yet, that is the very promise of the Gospels. Real community comes from real people who are real with each other. And it is then that Christ is present, because it is then that we are in real relationships, and only then do we experience forgiveness.

We sat in that booth, in our own way isolated from each other, unable to connect out of anger or frustration or shame. And my sister's mention of my father was enough to remind us that we were siblings and children and parents.

And our calling was to be real with each other, because in that reality we were connected and that reality Christ was present and everything that had been said that morning could be forgiven, acknowledged, owned, and forgiven.

That bowl of gumbo and that half a shrimp salad sandwich had never tasted so good.

Amen.