

## **Bread in the Desert**

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
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St. John United Church of Christ  
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### **Matthew 15:21-39**

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.*

*After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.*

*Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.' The disciples said to him, 'Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?' Jesus asked them, 'How many loaves have you?' They said, 'Seven, and a few small fish.' Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children. After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.*

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***"The disciples said to [Jesus],  
'Where are we to get enough bread in the desert...?'"***

Matthew 15:33

When I was declared "HIV+" in November of 1993, it was a time of personal apocalypse; the end was at hand. I felt I was never again going to see fall colors. I just knew it was going to be my last Christmas. Death was pounding at my door.

I also remember it as a time of pervasive fear, yet death was the least of my concerns. I was serving as a pastor in a very large, conservative-fundamentalist denomination called Southern Baptists. I knew that if my HIV status were to be revealed, I would be fired in a heartbeat. Then from where would my health and disability insurance come? And for goodness sakes, what would I do for a living? Who would hire a gay, HIV+ pastor with a music education degree and a Master of Divinity degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I just knew I was in deep doo doo!

Thank God for a small group of faithful friends who kept reminding me that God is real; that God's promise is to be with me always; that God's grace is abundant. I didn't have to look far. I saw it in their faces. I felt it in their touch and care.

In 1995, just about a year and half after my HIV+ diagnosis, I was summarily "thrown off" the Southern Baptist train for refusing to recant that I understood myself to be a gay man. My HIV status was revealed at that time too. Having been set free from my Southern Baptist shackles (I often say "I've been in bondage and I've been free. Free is better!") I was finally free to immerse myself in the AIDS/HIV community, not as an observer from a distance, but as a member of the community. With no pastoral position to safeguard; with no sense of privilege to protect, I was suddenly unbound to dwell among the HIV/AIDS community—to feel the pain, to share the tears, to listen to the anger (both that of others and my own), to lift up the sick and to bury the dead. I walked into the world of apocalypse now.

And those of us who were Christians hoped that somehow the church would embrace more fully those infected and affected with HIV/AIDS with steadfast love and compassionate care; that they would do what Jesus did and comfort and heal the sick; welcome the outcast and stranger. Unfortunately, disappointingly, much of the Church was more caught up in its fear than in God's love; more concerned about purity and piety than humanity; more determined to find God in some ideal construct or some heaven light years away than about meeting God in the messiness of life right in front of them. But for those who acted that way, and sometimes still do, that was, and still is, their loss.

Then an amazing thing happened. In 1996, a new class of drugs came out called "protease inhibitors." And since then, many, many new and improved drugs have become available. And while these drugs do not cure AIDS/HIV, they have stopped, or at least slowed for many people the onslaught of death and sickness caused by HIV. These new drugs brought about a radical change in the AIDS/HIV community in America—and in me: What was once "apocalypse now" is now more like a long and tiresome season of waiting...what we in the Christian church call Advent. And for those of us with HIV disease, we find ourselves in this long period of waiting...of longing for our deepest hopes and dreams that are yet to be. We're waiting for an end to this disease...for a cure. We're waiting for the day when we can quit taking these life-giving medicines and find other uses for the outrageous amount of money it takes to pay for them. We're waiting for the day when the side-effects of this medicine will be no more: no more diarrhea; no more chronic fatigue; no more neuropathy or lipodistrophy; no more bull frog necks and chipmunk cheeks. We're waiting for the day when we no longer have to worry about the long-term consequences of all these HIV drugs on our bodies.

Often a metaphor for these waiting times, for these Advent times, is that of the desert. It is into such a Advent time that we in the Christian tradition hear the voice of the prophet who cries out: *'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'* Advent time is a time to look for God's gushing springs to flow in the desert barrenness; to seek the Spirit's clarity to rise up amidst the desert uncertainty; to watch for the desert to burst forth in bloom against the backdrop of aridity; to sense the presence of the Lord anew in the desert aloneness. And so, the question of the disciples in our gospel reading this evening is our question on this World AIDS Day: *"Where are we to get enough bread in the desert...?"*

I know this question is literally about food, but I want to suggest that it is also about *more than food*. It is about a deep, soul hunger. It is about a deep spiritual thirst. How will we be fed in this desert place? How will we be nourished during this Advent waiting time? I imagine Jesus looking at the hungry crowd (maybe looking at us tonight) and then saying to his fearful, anxious, skeptical, not always so bright, quirky followers:

"You give them something to eat. How many loaves have you?"

They said, "Seven, and a few small fish."

Then Jesus took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled.

And although it is still Advent time in the world of HIV/AIDS, there is no reason to think that we can't be filled and full even in this desert. Although it is still Advent time in the world of HIV/AIDS there is no reason to think that we can't live abundantly and hope steadfastly. Although it is still Advent time in the world of HIV/AIDS there is no reason to think we can't act our way into being; to live our wildest dreams now; to act as if our vision for love and life is already so.

And to those of you who have HIV flowing in your blood I say live life full and free. And do it NOW. Don't put it off. Don't shirk back because of HIV, *live on. Live on!*

At first, HIV was my "period." It was the end. Everything I longed for and dreamed of was tainted and stymied by that "period" called HIV. But that was my initial response. I learned quickly that I was not dead yet and that life would be miserable and unbearable if all I ever did was sit around and wait to die. And long before the United Church of Christ started saying "God is still Speaking" and lifting up the Gracie Allen quote, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma," I learned that I, as an HIV+ gay man and person of deep Christian faith, would have to replace that period with a comma! If I was going to survive...if I was going to thrive...I would have to be courageous and vulnerable to love. I was going to be open to what might be after the comma.

From the ruins of my HIV diagnosis and my firing from the Southern Baptist church (which I had wrongly thought were periods for sure), I have learned to live into the comma space. I have enjoyed fourteen years of marriage with my husband Dan. I started and completed my Doctor of Ministry. I helped organize a new and life-giving United Church of Christ and Alliance of Baptist congregation called Cross Creek Community Church.

And lo and behold, to the amazement of my dear Southern Baptist parents, and even to my own amazement, my husband Dan and I went and had children. First came a new born son, whom we were privileged to bring home from the hospital, whom we named Gideon, whom we adopted and is now 7 years old and in first grade. Then came Dan's 15 year old niece, Jamie, who became our foster daughter and lived with us throughout her high school years. We got a baby boy and a teenage girl all in one year. Try that and see how much life and exhaustion you can endure! Then, after Jamie moved on with her life after high school we took in little Aydan at 10 months as our foster son and are now in the process of adopting him.

I am so glad I did not let HIV become a period on my life. There has been so much goodness, so much grace, so much love, so much life, so much God that I have experienced since my HIV diagnosis. I'm so glad that the Still Speaking God and faithful friends helped me to envision and live into the comma, whether my world was being turned upside down by the horrors of an Apocalypse Now (whether real or perceived), or whether I am stammering through this long, long season of Advent.

And to all of us, whether gay or straight, HIV+ or HIV affected, lets not forget that this waiting time...this Advent time...this desert time will require that all of us share what we have to feed one another. Sara Miles in her delightful and powerful book, TAKE THIS BREAD, tells of her experience of feeding hungry people through a food pantry out of the St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. And while her story is about offering food to hungry people, her insights are just as applicable to us serving one another and feeding one another at our point of deepest hunger in the HIV/AIDS community. She said

They were all people who, like me, had come to get fed and stayed to help out. Who, like me, took that bread and got changed. We were all converting: turning into new people as we rubbed up against one another.

The transformation amazed me. I'd think about it as I unpacked the food; blushing red potatoes and curly spinach and ripe peaches that grocers had discarded, and that instead of being trash were feeding people. Once I picked up a huge grapefruit and showed it to a volunteer from St. Gregory's. "That's the stone the builders rejected," I said, quoting Scripture aloud with only a twinge of embarrassment. I could see, now, how we were like that, too: the volunteers, and the families who came for groceries. Each of us, at some point, might have been rejected for being

too young, too poor, too queer, too old, too crazy or difficult or sick; in one way or another, cracked, broken, not right. But gathered around the Table in this work, we were becoming right together, converted into the cornerstone of something God was building.”

(Sara Miles, *Take this Bread*, page 138-139)

It is this question of the disciple's that haunts me today, on World Aids Day 2009: “Where are we to get enough bread in the desert...?”

Let me offer some ideas. It is by no means an exhaustive list. I hope you'll add some ideas of your own.

First, let us learn to mark all bodies as holy, whether HIV+ or not. In marking bodies holy we will make holiness more visible and palpable.

Second, in spite of fundamentalist's stupidity and vitriol remember that there have always been different ways of being Christian (or Jews, or Muslim, or Buddhist) ...claim your own faith in Jesus and keep on going! Keep on moving deeper into humanity and life assured that that is where you will taste and experience God most powerfully.

Third, listen to one another deeply and intently and let that listening space be so roomy and sacred that it becomes a prayer. Listen to our own lives as they are in this desert, waiting time! And please, please let us not tell each other how to look at life, but how to listen to our lives, trusting that that is the place where we will meet God, not apart from it.

Fourth, let us create communities that are able to dwell in ambiguity and unsettledness. Can we allow people to bring their stories and their testimonies without rushing to words of correction or judgment? Can we not rush to answer the answerable questions about evil and suffering with platitudes, or with choking dogmas, or with thumping bibles? Can we not turn the awesome mystery of God into a fairy story where everything turns out nice in the end? Let us help each other create communities that know how to bear the real, the scary, the unknowable, the long, long waiting!

Fifth, let us learn again the practice of healing the sick. I'm not talking about miracles here, I talking about healing. I'm talking about change. I am talking about a wholeness that is possible in spite of your t-cell count going down and your viral load going up. Let us learn the practice of healing in spite of sickness and disease. Such practice is indeed a miracle!

Finally, let us look for the Kingdom or realm of God not in some afterlife to come, but in this one precious life before us. Let us find God's presence in the midst of unresolved human pain. Let us find God with the smell of fish on hands and with bread to share.

While the deaths and illnesses have slowed, and while we slog it out in this long Advent time, make no mistake about it, the "Body of Christ STILL has AIDS."

And too many people are still being diagnosed, especially among people of color, youth, women and the elderly. The global reality of AIDS/HIV churns on in mind-boggling proportions and with cataclysmic consequences.

And since there is no cure for AIDS, we find ourselves in this long season of Advent. Still waiting. Still hoping. Still working. Still caring.

And this World AIDS Day, we are still praying for this scourge to end...still praying, “Come, Lord Jesus, come!”

Amen.