

A fragrant walk over creeping thyme from a parking lot to an open-air tent for a memorial service last Saturday got me thinking about lawns, those kind of manicured expanses that many people desired as a symbol of success. I would occasionally see signs that advertised “vacant land” in the town in New Jersey in the foothills of the Ramapo Mountains in which I used to live. I wondered whether the developers responsible for them appreciated the irony of their language. The land deemed “vacant” by a realtor was usually teeming with a diversity of life. The developers anticipated an impressive house taking up a large part of the lot once many of the trees were cut down, replaced by a monoculture lawn and a few shrubs and flowers, perhaps with a couple of clumps of some decorative grasses that consume undue amounts of fertilizer and water. And then maybe a pool or tennis court. People pay huge amounts of money, it seems to me, for what will become actually less life, at least if one assumes that the human species is not the only one that counts. Another irony is that the large developments on formerly “vacant” land often bear witness to what has been obliterated, with such street names like “Quail Run” or “Pheasant Trail.” I wondered whether it was out of spite or grudging admiration on the part of the developer who named Jane Drive and Jenny Lane in this town, named after two conservationist friends of mine waged an ultimately unsuccessful battle to stop a development of luxury homes that replaced a working farm next to a wildlife sanctuary.

Throughout the gospels we find that Jesus is acquainted with what many would have considered “vacant” space, the deserted places or wilderness – regarded as uninhabitable and barren--even dangerous--to some, but known as places of challenge, grace, insight, and salvation to others. His life of prayer and service involve a special saving rhythm of contemplative solitude and compassionate activity – one we would do well to discern and cultivate.

Jesus begins his public ministry, just as John the Baptist did, in the wilderness, where he is tempted, but triumphs over the devil’s design to sabotage him. I think we

can say that the disciples are still learning – to them the deserted place is one of deprivation and scarcity; to Jesus it is a source of blessing and abundance. At least in our gospel for today, it offers the promise of a place to grieve and to re-center himself.

Verse 13 actually begins: “Now when Jesus heard this... he withdrew to a deserted place by himself.” What he has heard from his disciples is the account of the beheading of his cousin John the Baptist, who was courageous enough to confront King Herod when he took up with Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. Herod had wanted to put John to death, but he feared the crowd and its regard for John as a prophet. You remember this gruesome story – Herod was celebrating a birthday feast when he promised Herodias’s daughter who danced before the company whatever she wished. Prompted by her mother, she asked for John’s head on a platter. And it seems that Herod is now conflating Jesus with John—thinking perhaps Jesus is John raised from the dead.

And immediately before this account of the beheading, Jesus had been rejected in his hometown when he returned there and began teaching in the synagogue. Initially impressed with his wisdom and deeds of power, the townspeople began to question and even to take offense when they realized he was somehow one of them. The report from the home front was “And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.”

David Keller writes of the desert and the life of stillness: “This is not a rejection of life’s activities or of life itself. It is a ‘fleeing’ from influences that are futile and that can distract or prevent a person from pursuing his or her path toward experience of God and authentic human living.”¹ Jesus, being human, knew that he could be distracted, knew that he needed to focus on the path his Father had given him.

But in our gospel, Jesus no sooner withdraws in a boat to a deserted place by himself than the crowd (and presumably his disciples) anticipate him, traveling from their towns on foot to meet up with him. When he gets ashore, Jesus finds the crowd and

¹ David Keller, *Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), p. 80.

sees their immense need and hunger for him. Like the Good Samaritan, he is able to set aside his personal agenda for a time from the abundance of his center, knowing he will return to his needed spiritual discipline or practice as soon as he can. (In fact, in the verses following our text, Jesus dismisses the crowds as soon as they are fed, tells his disciples to get into the boat and go on ahead, and then goes up to the mountain by himself to pray.)

For Jesus, the crowd evokes his response of compassion. Jesus heals their sick. His other speech and actions during that day are not recorded – presumably there is something about his very person and presence that they need. But when evening comes the disciples, knowing the physical hunger of the crowd at the end of a long day, seek to scatter and send them off into the villages for food. While they see the paucity of just five loaves and two fish in a deserted place and experience some anxiety; Jesus sees more clearly, sees promise and sufficiency – even for more than five thousand. So, he directs the crowd to sit down on the grass. Taking the loaves and fish, he looks to heaven, blesses and breaks the loaves, and gives it to his disciples to distribute to the crowd. And, as we read, “all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.” This small detail reveals God’s character. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead writes poetically of it: “The image -- and it is but an image -- the image under which this operative growth of God’s nature is best conceived, is that of a tender care that nothing be lost.”²

In *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles describes how she came to faith as an atheist through an Episcopal Church in San Francisco. St. Gregory’s distributes communion to all who come without prerequisites – just like Jesus feeding the crowd. She writes of her experience: “I still can’t explain my first communion. It made no sense. I was in tears and physically unbalanced. I felt as if I had just stepped off a curb or been knocked over, painlessly, from behind. The disconnect between what I thought was happening—I was eating a piece of bread; what I heard someone else say was happening—the piece

² Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 346.

of bread was the ‘body’ of ‘Christ,’ a patently untrue or at best metaphorical statement; and what I *knew* was happening—God, named ‘Christ’ or ‘Jesus,’ was real, and in my mouth—utterly short-circuited my ability to do anything but cry.”³ Drawn to the discipline of regular worship and communion, she would begin a food pantry serving hundreds of people each week.

Miles relates a conversation she had with the bishop of California, Bill Swing, when she asked him to tell her about bread. “There’s a hunger beyond food that’s expressed in food...and that’s why feeding is always a kind of miracle. It speaks to a bigger desire....The feeding of the five thousand, the miracle wasn’t that Jesus multiplied the loaves. It’s that the disciples took the bread and did what they were told, got up and started feeding, and something happened....I consider myself as one of those people who’s got to do what Jesus said when he told the disciples, shut up, just go feed the people....You know, it’s a mystery. But sometimes you just have to trust and eat.”⁴

Next week, God willing, St. Andrew’s will resume public worship with one service on Sunday mornings at 9:30, with social distancing and other guidelines in place. We are restricted on numbers in our sanctuary and ask you to register ahead of time. It will be the first Eucharist celebrated here since March 15.

We have been in our own wilderness these last few months. I hope that God has been feeding you, perhaps in new ways, and that that has given you food for this journey none of us expected. I wonder how many of us will have tears in our eyes. I pray that I will never take celebrating the Eucharist, the great meal of thanksgiving, for granted. Trust and eat. Feed your deep hunger. Know abundance in the wilderness. Respond from a deep center. Taste and see. Share and be the life of Christ. Here and now and forever. *Amen.*

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³ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A radical conversion* (New York: Ballantine, 2007), pp. 58-59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.