

4th Easter - A - 4/13/08 – Matthew 9:10-13 – The Ripple Effect – Pastor Charlie

Throughout the weeks of Easter, we're focusing on the Lord's Prayer and what we mean when we pray, "Your kingdom come." Now that God has raised Jesus from the dead and the presence of Christ lives in us, we are to continue the work of Jesus in the world, the hard work of bringing God's Kingdom of grace, mercy and justice to those in need. In the words of Jesus: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has called me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). The baton has been handed off from Jesus to you and me. But what does that look like and what can we do to help bring in God's Kingdom?

Today we focus on the "us" in the petition "Give 'us' this day our daily bread." Notice that phrase isn't "give me," which is so characteristic of our culture. It's not about "me;" it's about God. While it's okay to ask God for what we need, the real question is: What does God need us to do? God has blessed us and gives us what we need for today in order that through us God might provide for others. Notice the movement. We "gather" to give God our praise, be filled with God's presence and grace, be nurtured by God's Word and the Sacraments, and discover our purpose in God's larger purpose. Filled with God's power, we "go" to serve. God sends us into the world to be God's blessing to others. We're always looking for opportunities to share God's love.

So who is the "us" in "give 'us' this day our daily bread?" Who exactly are we to help? Look to your left and right, the person right next to you. Begin there. Begin with your family. Ask, "How might I serve you on behalf of Christ? What do you need?" The first circle of influence is us and our own personal need. The second ripple is our family; the third our co-workers and schoolmates; the fourth neighbors and friends; fifth those in the larger community; and sixth, the world. In Acts 2:44 we read these words about the first disciples: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." We might call this "the ripple effect" of God's love and grace in our lives. God gives us what we need, so that from our abundance we might meet the needs of others.

So who is the "us" in "give 'us' this day our daily bread?" (Slides) Jesus said, "Feed the hungry." So "us" are the homebound to whom we deliver Mobile Meals, the homeless whom we feed on Friday morning and Thursday night, those we help by collecting canned goods for the Food Pantry, and those we help through the Heifer Project and the CROP Walk. Who is the "us"? "I was homeless and you provided me shelter." It includes those for whom we build a Habitat house or refurbish homes, provide transitional housing at Pathways, Partnership Village and the night shelter; it includes the chronically homeless who need our emotional, spiritual and financial support; those we help with rent through our Emergency Assistance Fund. Who is the "us"? "I was naked and you clothed me." It includes the impoverished wherever they live be it in Greensboro, North Carolina, Biloxi, Costa Rica or Africa. It includes those who suffer from HIV/AIDS or natural disasters. One of the things I love about the Lutheran Church is how we are present throughout the world. Through our World Hunger Appeal, we not only provide emergency food for the hungry, but we also help people develop the means to provide for themselves. We are present in Africa making a difference in the AIDS epidemic. Along with the Methodist Church, and now the financial help of Ted Turner, we provide mosquito netting to help eliminate the threat of malaria. "We," working together with God, are transforming the world and bringing in the Kingdom.

Who is the "us" in "give 'us' this day our daily bread?" We are "us"! Jesus came to embrace every person with God's love. No one is excluded. We see that in today's lesson where Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Imagine the scene. Jesus shows up at the Soup Kitchen, sits with day laborers, the homeless, drug addicts and those who suffer from mental illness, tells jokes, gives encouragement, and enters into relationship to let them know they have worth and value. After all, they are God's children. They might not feel like it and others might not treat them like it. But the fact remains: they are God's children. Are we as shocked as the Pharisees? Do we realize that "us" includes everyone? It's not about me; it's not about you; it's about God and the coming Kingdom. How big is your God? How big is your church? Is it big enough to include everyone in the embrace of God's love? It all begins with God. Then the ripple effect takes over, and we, with God, make waves as we extend God's grace to everyone.