



**A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Canon P. Ronald Spann, *Assisting Priest***

**The 8th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13, Year C)
31 July 2022**

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We just heard St. Luke's version of one of the defining moments in Jesus' ministry. The feeding of the multitudes with loaves and fishes also made it into Matthew, Mark, and John, into their gospels. And that's big because, interestingly, not all the defining moments in Jesus' life appear all the time in all four gospels, but this is one that does. And also of interest, this passage is not appointed for reading in the very year when our cycle of gospel readings primarily comes from Luke. We had to slip it in this week, so it can provide backlighting for our participation in the canned food drive, the Loaves and Fishes Gathering, that we are observing today for Crossroads.

So, let's take a minute. Let's take a minute to ask ourselves about the purpose and meaning of our loaves and fishes project today as we've gathered the different dried and canned goods that some of you are going to be taking into inner city Detroit later this morning. Why would we want to connect what we're doing with the event that we just heard about in this gospel of Luke?

And I don't mean that as a rhetorical question. Right now, it's a real question. I'm just inviting any spontaneous thoughts or images that come to mind to you. Why did Drew want to have us connect, and whoever else with him, for planning for today's liturgy? Let's use this gospel. Why? What's the connection?

Feeding the hungry. Yeah. Because our gifts are going to feed the hungry. This is a story about feeding hungry. Caring? Okay, neighborly care. Mutual care for our neighbors.

So, I was asking you. Now, you asked me a question. All right. Yes. Well, let's look at that. Maybe something might come from that. All right. So, there's a word that sums up the various observations we just made about our involvement with Crossroads and our loaves and fishes project today. And so,



another response. Would any of you be willing to take a stab at the word that I'm thinking about that kind of sums all this together? Anybody want to?

Caring. Generosity. Sacrifice. Abundance. Gratitude.

Gratitude. Oh, you guys are great. Well, all of those are energy involved in the word that I'm thinking of. But actually, my particular word is the word charity. Our gesture today of taking the foods that we'll be taking, I'm offering to you to think of as an act of charity. So, what light can we throw on our actions this weekend from what we've just heard from the gospel? Why charity? Jesus' apostles, just a little background. Jesus' apostles had just returned after an assignment in which He had paired them up in six teams of two to fan out into all the villages within a target area that He had chosen for them. It was a major leadership experiment that Jesus was doing that involved them in proclaiming His message just as they had seen Him doing to proclaim the message of the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. And so, they were doing that accepting hospitality from the local folks, staging their healing clinics, and they come back and He invites them to debrief. "Let's go someplace remote and quiet and deserted. And I want to hear what you just lived. I want to hear all about it." Well, what happens instead, as we all know, is that their retreat for 12, 13 with Jesus in, turned out to be a retreat for 5,000 more people, a retreat that went seriously south very quickly.

And so, those very same local folk, whom they had just spent so much time among, were hungry for more of what they had already been touched by. Jesus and the apostles are now in the public eye, if they had never been in the public eye as they are at this point. Their retreat is discovered, and this flash multitude flash floods Jesus' retreat with the apostles. Luke says that Jesus' response to this was to welcome the masses. And He started in on a whole new round of teaching and healing. He welcomed them. He welcomed them. Matthew says, "He had compassion for them." And Mark says the same thing, as well, and also goes on to say why He had compassion on them because, Mark says, "They were like sheep without a shepherd in Jesus' eyes." That was the moment, I would say, when the spark of charity lit a fire.

The spark of charity lit a fire. Charity is a Latin word with a written meaning to the word *carus*, *cara* the feminine, which means dear, as in the dear thing, the dear little thing. We hold those little bundles of joy in our arms. As in darling, as in terms of endearment. This flood of people were hungry. But it wasn't, Peter, just a hunger of the body that Jesus saw. It was a hunger that went much deeper. As John's gospel puts it, "He saw for their in their hunger. In them, he saw a hunger for the Bread of Life." And so, Jesus began to teach them even more about the kingdom of God because He was very



clear about what they had been suffering at the hands of the kingdoms of this world. Charity begins with a sensory experience: seeing, hearing, feeling. And if our hearts, and I suppose I could say our vision and our hearing, as well. If they're healthy enough, we will see here and feel. We will feel the pains of endearment. We will feel broken and hearted. We'll feel brokenhearted and even indignant in what we discover about the suffering of others.

Now, I'm not the least bit surprised if the word charity triggers some vibes of resistance in us. And that's probably good. For now, however, I'm going to ask this just to oversimplify on purpose and say yes to charity, and that there are basically two kinds of charity: charity, the real deal, and toxic charity. Toxic charity is a very clarifying term that my colleague and friend, a man named Bob Lupton, coined from his years of leadership of the faith-based community development ministry and inner-city Atlanta, Georgia. Bob is a white businessman of a very accomplished career who, in his walk with Jesus, came to a moment when he found himself called to move to inner city Atlanta with his wife, with their kids, where he would spend about 30 years on site developing a ministry of outreach and learned a lot about himself and his own motives and the charitable things that they had started out doing. And it led him to write a book with a title *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help and How to Reverse It*. So, we know that charity can start out as something good, potentially, but it can also get off track.

The man who inspired Bob Lupton and inspired me was a black religious leader, a third grade dropout, who is now in a celebrated leader in the church here in the United States. And who said, "You know, think about that old song that we learned a long time ago about charity, for instance." He says, "What happens when you meet a person who's hungry, and you give them a fish?" So, if you give them a fish, what?

They eat for a day. John says, "That's charity. If they're hungry, feed them. You don't go off in some philosophical rant. If they're hurting, they're hungry, you feed them." Charity is real. It's important. Now, the old song goes a little bit further, doesn't it? It says, "If you teach someone how to fish, they will eat for the rest of their lives."

All right. So, you mobilize something. You appeal to their inner capacity. You engage that. You respect their dignity and their capability to not be dependent on someone else's handouts, but to engage their own humanity and accomplish what they're here for. But then John 3:8 says, "Don't stop there. Because you know what? We have one other very important question to ask. How in the Sam Hill do you get access to the water where the fish are? And how do you get control of that?" Because if I'm



going to fish, I got to be able to have that kind of access and that freedom and empowerment mobility. So, charity gives person a fish. Social action, organization, teach them how to fish. Economic justice, open up access to the crowd, redistribute that access.

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And so, charity is at the very heart, the very beginnings, of what we will be involved in once again today. Charity is something I got to witness a couple of winters ago when I was leaving Kroger's on Kercheval. I was headed up Notre Dame to Charlevoix going across Waterloo on a wet, rainy night when I saw an older African American man on foot pushing a loaded grocery cart. I don't think it was all groceries. I think probably he had some other kind of belongings he had in the cart. He was going against traffic there on the left, going up Notre Dame, exposed to risks for the traffic and weather and struggling there on that pavement. Now, I was driving behind someone in a Cadillac Escapade who was moving cautiously ahead. But all of a sudden his brake lights go on. He stops. I see him that he's rolled down the window, and he's talking to the man with the cart, obviously engaging him.

Next, I see him get out of the Escapade. Here's this rather sporty looking, late middle-aged, white man who hit his brakes, steps out, goes to the back of his car, he reaches in, and pulls out a very elegant looking black umbrella. He opens it up, walks to the man in the cart, and I don't know what he said exactly, but I know he's said one way or the other, "Here take this." And they nod at each other. The driver got back and his Escapade and disappeared into the night. I don't think the entire encounter took more than a whole minute.

I was probably the only witness to what happened between those two men. And so far as I'm concerned, that was an act of genuine charity. There was something about its simplicity about its appropriateness, about its kindness, about the respectful act that I witnessed as one man was meeting a neighbor's need. It was a moment in which a vulnerable person's dignity had been respected. Now, that's also something that I see about what will be happening today and our vision of Loaves and Fishes Sunday here in the late summer of 2022. What we want to do is indeed to let our hearts, eyes, and ears respond, to feel that charitable action, and to ask ourselves what is our state of health. And so, that brings me to one other old proverb. It's about the origins of charity. What do we say? Charity begins at home.

Charity begins at home. At home, whether it is at home, in your domestic setting, with your family, your children, or your housemates, or whatever kind of fellowship you are at home. Or maybe you didn't have a home where those things were celebrated. So, but you have a church home now. You've



got a church home right here where charity has its beginnings. Charity begins right here. Here's the place where we can deal, especially as American Christians, with the things that would otherwise dull the senses of our heart, would dull our hearing, our singing, and our vision. Psalm 49, that we just read this morning, spoke about it. I hope you were listening to the words that you read about the high and low and the rich and poor dwelling together.

God had a word for them and a warning about what it means to pursue the love of wealth. It's very important for us as Americans because, what? We are the bearers and the proclaimers of the celebrated American dream. Well, when you think about the basics of the American dream, it's a dream about getting rich, about acquiring and amassing wealth, and it's a dream that is very costly in terms of what it requires us to extract from the earth, from human labor, and everything else. The American dream has entrenched itself, not only here, but everywhere, and such that it has become for planet Earth, not a dream, but a nightmare at this point in our history and evolution.

And so, if charity is to begin at home, it's a charity. It's a healing. It's a recovering of heart healthy practices that clear away all that has dulled our sensitivity and deceived us with the enticement to wealth and its acquisition. And to say, "Is that really what human community is all about? Jesus, what is it that You mean about the kingdom of God? Because I think what You're trying to tell is, Jesus, is there is an expression of community which enhances rather than suppresses human dignity. There is an understanding of the community of human community that brings best into human relationships." Even in small little beginnings, like I saw that night on Notre Dame. You know what Notre Dame is? That's French. What does it mean?

Our lady. I love that. Notre Dame. Charity begins at home. Jesus was a little boy in the home of Notre Dame, our lady. Our lady who sang the Magnificat, the Magnificat that celebrates God and the words there from the first chapter of Luke, "a God who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty." Wow. So, thank you, Notre Dame Street. Church, I offer this to you as you think about our charity, our terms of endearment, that we want God to tenderize more and more in us. I want us to go away as we fellowship, maybe pack some summer packages, lunches for kids, let our hearts be warmed with the flame of charity. And a word of caution. If in fact we're going to play around with that box of matches called charity, be careful because you can start a fire. Amen.