

Bread for the Making

II Thessalonians 3:6-13

I was a child when I first heard the story of the Little Red Hen. I recall I sometimes confused it with the tale of Chicken Little, not only for the poultry attribution, but also because when my mother would do her weekly baking on Saturday morning, we'd hear this characteristic cry: "My bread is falling, my bread is falling!" (not due to her breadbaking skills, mind you, but to her four roughhousing boys tearing through the kitchen!).

The story of the Little Red Hen, of course, goes like this:

A little red hen once found a grain of wheat. "Who will plant this wheat?" she said. "I won't," said the dog. "Not me," said the cat. "Not a chance," said the pig. "Then I will," said the little red hen. And she did.

Very soon the wheat began to grow and the green leaves came out of the ground. The sun shone and the rain fell and the wheat kept on growing until it was tall, strong, and ripe.

"Who will reap this wheat?" asked the little red hen. "I can't," said the dog. "I'm too tired," said the cat. "Don't want to," said the pig. "Then I will," said the little red hen. And she did.

"Who will thresh this wheat?" asked the little red hen. "Nah," said the dog. "I'm busy," said the cat. "Don't look at me," said the pig. "Then I will," said the little red hen. And she did.

"Who will take this wheat to the mill to have it ground?" asked the little red hen. "I've got other plans," said the dog. "Too much bother," said the cat. "What am I, your slave?" said the pig. "Then I will," said the little red hen. And she did.

When the little red hen returned with the flour, she asked, "Who will mix the flour to make the bread?" "Sorry," yawned the dog. "It's too hard," moaned the cat. "Why, are you too lazy to do it?" snorted the pig. "Then I will," sighed the little red hen. And she did.

"Who will help bake the bread?" asked the little red hen. "It's too much work," said the dog. "My paws are sensitive to the heat," said the cat.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” snapped the pig. “Then I will,” said the little red hen. And she did.

So she baked the bread and set it out on the table. “Who will eat this bread?” clucked the little red hen. “Yum, I will,” said the dog eagerly. “You can count on me!” meowed the cat. “Move over, clucky, you’re in my way!” said the pig rushing to the table. “SORRY!” exclaimed the little red hen as she picked up the loaf of freshly baked bread! “The one who made it ate it!” And that she did!

The point of the story is fairly obvious—she who made it ate it. There are plenty of moralisms which say the same thing. “You reap what you sow.” “Everyone must carry their own sack to the mill.” Or to quote more literally Genesis 3: “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread...” You can draw parallels to other sayings, such as, “Many hands make light work,” “Each one is the architect of his own fate,” “We share and share alike,” and so forth.

Whatever you take away from the tale of the Little Red Hen is familiar wisdom because it’s inherent to so much of what we experience in life; that is, we depend upon the cooperation of others to accomplish what we all together want to enjoy. I’m not a baker, so I can’t really say how much breadbaking by committee works, but there are many tasks and projects in and outside of the kitchen that require, not only cooperation, but even basic interest by others. Tasks may be done more efficiently by a committee of one, but their end results are not necessarily more effective when done solo. Anything worth doing that is intended to benefit many people is best accomplished with a broad-based commitment and investment. Leaving it in the hands of one person to make things happen, more often than not, tends to narrow the list of those who are ultimately

satisfied, while widening the slate of those who become armchair critics.

Now you can apply this logic to many settings. As we come into the Thanksgiving season, the common meal that is served on the holiday before family and friends comes to mind. It's one thing to be an invited guest, where the expectation might be for you to simply arrive to enjoy the hospitality of your hosts. It's usually different if you're a part of the household or family and then presume you have no responsibility to help out in the preparations for the meal (that usually doesn't go over very well!). Expectations might be to cook or bake, to help set the table, or to clean up afterward. The obvious intent is for each one to do their part in the meal that everyone enjoys. Not only does it lighten the load on the chef, but it also is a tangible way to express appreciation for the meal and kindness and affection to the ones preparing it. It's a common courtesy, yes; but a cooperative spirit is also an important way to express love and care. To do anything less—or worse, to place demands on the ones at work, while you sit back in leisure—is simply rude and ruins the spirit of the day. Thanksgiving becomes a time for gratitude—to count one's blessings—not only for the food you enjoy, but to celebrate the company you keep. One expresses gratitude by lifting a hand and helping lighten the load of another.

Now the preacher in me also wants to highlight the psychological and theological reasons for why we cooperate with others and help whenever we can. It's something that can be missed, especially by those who do it grudgingly or only by coercion. Helping out, offering assistance, and sharing the burden of any common task

enhances the meaning and value of the experience. You become invested not only in the result, but in the process. By doing so, it gets you out of your own head and self-interests and into a shared experience which, of course, is how we build relationships with others. Being thoughtful, considerate and generous to others is not only a way to bring a smile to someone else, it also psychologically changes a person's outlook toward something more positive and satisfying to them. The end result is, the simple act of giving of yourself to help someone else is what helps to create the experience for which you can be thankful. When you get outside of your own ego needs and preoccupations and start to assist someone else, the focus of your attention moves from you to someone else; typically, it has the psychological effect of making you happier and more pleasant as a person.

Why? Because generosity is a positive, selfless motive; kindness is what lightens the heart. Positive motives are attitude adjusters. Not only are you appreciated by those who value your presence and help, you're also less focused on what your needs are in favor of being mindful of what those around you might be. That makes you happier as a person! Where's the down side in making yourself happier while bringing a bit of joy and relief to someone else?

What happens spiritually is "heterocentric transformation"—a technical term for "selflessness" I picked up years ago while writing my dissertation, based in part on the work of Scottish theologian and philosopher, John MacMurray. Without going into all of the details of my thesis, let me say this: MacMurray considered the moral self—that which makes us truly moral beings—as rooted in our mutuality,

i.e., our ability to be interdependent and interactive with others. This contrasts with the fairly common notion that human beings are true to themselves when they act out of their self interests. MacMurray would counter that, explaining humans act at their best when they *aren't* motivated by self-interest. Self-interest only produces egoism, selfishness, and a fundamental fear and defensiveness toward others. Instead, our best behaviors and attitudes arise within us when we are intentionally selfless and other-oriented, i.e. “heterocentric.” The more we move out of a preoccupation with ourselves and from our own interests, needs and wants, the more we are capable of loving, of being kind and compassionate and just—the very qualities that allow humans to live in community and to be psychologically and spiritually mature and content.

As Catholic theologian, Mark Poorman, writes in assessing MacMurray’s argument:

If, as [MacMurray] has suggested, the moral life is positively motivated by love leading to mutuality and interdependence and negatively motivated by fear in its two forms of fighting or fleeing, then the challenge...of religion...is to seek a transformation whereby fear is changed into love. Love engenders a communal morality, an ideal. In the personal, mutual, and interdependent aspects of common life, in the cultivation of relationships, human flourishing occurs. Moral maturity consists in interdependence. ...In the ideal community, each member is positively motivated, heterocentric [meaning, “other-centered”], a distinct individual “realizing himself in and through each other.”...The mission of religion is to create, maintain, and deepen this ideal of community and further extend it by the complete transformation of fear as a motive...this transformation constitutes the “redemptive” dimension of religion.¹

In effect, this challenges the notion of self-reliance as a mark of spiritual maturity. Instead, interdependence, cooperation, and

¹ Mark Poorman, *Interactional Morality: A Foundation for Moral Discernment in Catholic Pastoral Ministry*, Georgetown University Press, 1993, pp. 78-79.

mutuality are what bring us to our most developed nature as human beings. Besides, self-reliance is only an illusion; we can never truly be entirely self-reliant. But we can be entirely cooperative.

I think this was one of the Apostle Paul's chief concerns in Thessalonica—a church where some were living off the welfare of others—doing so, not necessarily because they were lazy, irresponsible ne'er-do-wells, but because they were serious believers, attentive to the premise that Jesus was returning at any moment to establish his promised reign and they didn't want to be caught unawares, as some of the parables in the Gospels forewarned.

Why would Paul be troubled by this—why would he point out that when he was there, none of this took place? Was he just criticizing idle, lazy people who needed to step up and take care of themselves instead of freeloading on others? Was he congratulating himself for being self-reliant?

Though, initially, that might make sense, I don't believe that's what he was driving at. Instead, I think it had to do with how Paul viewed Christian community. They were acting in ways contrary to Paul's vision outlined more extensively in later letters to the Romans (Rom. 12) and to the Corinthians (I Cor. 12-14), where he referred to the mutuality and interdependence of the members of the church—together they were the body of Christ, and individually members of it. Spiritual gifts were referenced, as you may recall, where in Paul's view each person had gifts, abilities, talents, interests, passions, etc. that they would contribute to the life and ministry of the church. In that, the church as a whole benefited from the full expression and interaction of those gifts. It was not meant to be that some people

invested themselves into the community while others merely gleaned what they could from it, without contributing.

Much like MacMurray, but in language far less complex, Paul emphasized continually the importance of interdependence, of giving oneself to others, and of the preeminence of love as being the ideal expression of their moral and spiritual character. Beliefs and knowledge are always incomplete (as he eloquently explained in I Corinthians 13), but love was different. How they related to each other and worked cooperatively was the fullest expression of their love for one another and of God's love for them. That, in this life, could be complete—fully known!

So in our text for today, Paul wasn't preaching self-reliance, rather, it was *self-sacrifice*, *self-giving* from each one for the benefit of the whole. Those who were idle, those who didn't do their part, weren't making their contribution; thus it diminished the strength of the relationships within this beloved community, resulting in a lesser witness of the love that was the fullest expression of Christ within and among them.

If you follow what I'm saying, then you realize the attitudes displayed by the characters in the tale of the Little Red Hen is precisely the opposite of what Christian community is all about. Instead of shirking responsibility, community is about each one helping out. Every time we do something, it brings out the best in us, individually and collectively, when we all contribute in some way. It might be with ideas, or through our hands and feet, or in some other contribution. Our many hands make heavy tasks and burdensome work lighter and easier. And it expresses our love for one another and

for Christ's presence in our lives. When only a few carry the load, it not only diminishes what we can do, it actually undermines the spirit of mutuality that God would inspire in us.

To be honest, one of our best expressions of that comes up this week culminating on Saturday. Our annual Holiday Bazaar is a fundraiser, to be sure, but it is also an important spirit- and community-builder. Every one of us will benefit by doing something, either before or on the day of, because we are working with people we know and those we can come to know. It's not just about the money we raise; it's about the company we keep! We will get tired, yes, but we'll be lighter in spirit, simply from the fact that many hands have made light work. Working together at the Holiday Bazaar is a good reflection of how much love and care we have as a beloved community of Christ.

The Little Red Hen might have had no help in making her bread. But we will be there to help each other and to make our "bread" together, because we want to be at our best and we are at our best when we give of ourselves to others and to our beloved community of Christ. For that is how love grows, and it is love that always makes things meaningful and good. And it's also how we lighten our load through life.

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