

Of Mice and Meals **November 26, 2023**

There once was a Lion who lived in the grasslands of Africa. One day, the Lion lay sleeping on a rock, with his head resting on his paws. A timid little Mouse walking across the rock discovered the Lion with a shock. In her fear and hurry to get away, the Mouse ran across the Lion's paw. The Lion woke up immediately and laid his other huge paw angrily on the tiny creature to trap her. He considered eating her.

"Spare me!" begged the poor Mouse. "Please let me go and someday I will surely repay you."

The Lion was amused to think that a Mouse could ever help him. But he was generous and let the Mouse go.

A few days later, while stalking his prey in the forest, the Lion was caught in a hunter's net. He wrestled and tried to free himself but with no luck. In frustration, the Lion roared a loud, terrible roar. The Mouse recognized the voice and quickly found the Lion struggling in the net. Running to one of the great ropes that held him, she gnawed at it until it broke, and soon the Lion was free.

"You laughed when I said I would repay you," said the Mouse. "Now you see that even a Mouse can help a Lion."

The moral of the story: An act of kindness is never wasted.

This is one of Aesop's most famous fables. It's one that Cora and I just discovered in an anthology of children's writings this week, believe it or not. And the fable has a good message about the importance of kindness.

It seems that we are supposed to relate to the lion, trusting that every kindness we offer to others will return to us in some way.

Now let's take the fable of the Lion and the Mouse and add a few of Matthew's favorite themes: some judgment, an in-group and an out-group, a pinch of eternal punishment, and voila! We've got our Gospel story!

Jesus the king sits on his throne in judgment (fitting image for "Christ the King" Sunday). What separates the sheep from the goats, the good from the evil, is how they treated others. And not just others, but "the least" of the members of Christ's family, lit. "the least of these my brothers and sisters."

I think the temptation in hearing this story is to treat it like a simple fable. If I am kind to people who are less fortunate, then I will go to heaven! That seems to be Matthew's point.

But if the only reason why we are kind or hospitable, if the only reason we feed or clothe people or visit them in jail is to go to heaven, then I think we miss the mark. If that's the ticket into

heaven, then we could earn our way in. In the Church, we call that “works righteousness” – we earn righteousness through our good works. What Jesus tells us over and over again is that faith is what is most important, and our actions and good works naturally follow as a consequence of our faith.

So feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, welcoming a stranger... that should not be the goal in and of itself, but our faith and understanding of Jesus should be so rich and deep that we can't help but feel compelled to serve others.

Even so, there's something about this parable that doesn't sit well with me. And it's the same issue I have with “The Lion and the Mouse.” The perspective is written from the benefactor's viewpoint. The ones feeding and sheltering and visiting. The lion.

I wonder, what about the times when we are “the least” of Jesus' family? What about the times in our lives when we are the mouse?

Well, this story still has something to teach us. In those dark moments of our lives, in those times when we are struggling, needing to be fed (physically or spiritually), when we need help: we are Christ's sisters and brothers in those moments. We know Jesus more intimately in those moments, maybe more so than when we are helpers or when we are the lion! We are part of Christ's family.

That reminder should be in our minds as we talk and think about outreach. Sometimes, we in the Church think of ourselves as givers, and we are here to help those less fortunate. Jesus reminds us that everyone in the church is his brother or sister, and we are called to look out for each other. Jesus makes no distinction between the helper and the helped, the server and the served. There are not volunteers versus charity cases... There are only members of Christ's family.

You probably know that this coming Tuesday, St. Gabriel's is serving a meal to local folks who are in a tough spot financially. Thank you to everyone who donated to make this possible.

And you also might know from reading the local news, the demand for food pantries is much higher now than it ever has been in recent history. Rising prices mean that people have to make hard choices about what they can buy, and more people have found that they need a bit of help.

So the Community Meal is much needed in our community. It is one of the programs run by Hopewell Love, a ministry that helps people in a number of ways – partners with folks to:

- get food
- find housing
- do their laundry
- buy clothing
- get medical care

and other tasks. If you're interested in finding out more, talk to Russ or me after the service.

One of the first ministries of Hopewell Love when it was founded twenty-some years ago was the Community Meal. Up until COVID, it was an actual sit-down meal, with the food provided by a local church or organization.

And the premise was that everyone comes and sits and eats together. You could be a billionaire who wants a hearty chicken dinner, or you could be living on the street and not sure where your next meal is coming from. You could be part of a family of eight or a single woman.

It did not matter. You were a part of the human family; you were a part of Christ's family; and you ate together.

I'll share with you that I learned about the Community Meal when I first visited St. Gabriel's and was applying to work here, and I was impressed. That was a pretty powerful image of the kingdom of God.

Now of course, with COVID, the logistics of the meal had to shift. The dinner became a drive-through meal, and so there had to be a distinction logistically for those who received and those who gave. Volunteers stood outside the cars and gave food to those who drove up. As part of that shift, instead of inviting you all to be involved, we just ask you to donate (and you have responded generously).

The good news, as Russ can tell you, starting next year (in 2024), the plan is to return to a communal meal where everyone can come and eat as brothers and sisters. St. Gabriel's will provide a meal in May, but I'd encourage you to come to the meals even when we are not serving. Spend some time with the family of Jesus. Break bread together.

And in doing so, you live into the parable that Jesus gives. Share bread with the hungry. And allow yourself to have bread shared with you. Welcome a stranger... and allow yourself to be welcomed.

If we can do that, we can help realize this whole picture that Jesus has been talking about using parables for the past couple of weeks. We can see the kingdom of God here on earth.

Amen.