Sunday, July 30, 2000
CAN I HELP?
John 6:1-15

"Is there anything I can do to help? Please let me know." Most of us have made this kind of offer to friends or neighbors when we know they are facing a crisis. And we've all been the recipients of help from others, sometimes without asking for it and sometimes without even knowing where the help came from.

There are times when helping simply happens in the ordinary course of events. It's not something we think about or plan but is merely the instinctive response of a caring person. There's an enormous amount of goodwill in most human beings. It's almost like a reflex. Someone slips, and your arms go out. A car is stuck in the snow, and you join others to push. A flood or tornado hits a town, and people help each other. Someone at work feels depressed, and you try to cheer them up or at least say a kind word. It all seems natural and appropriate.

I'm always amazed at how quickly a neighborhood, church circle, or friends from work come to help when a severe illness or death takes place. Food is brought to the home or church. Offers to help pour in. People seem to sense what's needed, or if we don't, someone quickly comes up with an idea that is just right, and we're grateful.

A sense of well-being and pleasure comes from helping others. On the one hand, the effort is so natural that it might seem pointless or self-conscious to make much of it. Yet if we stop to consider why it feels so good, we sense that some deeper process is at work. When we express our innate generosity, when we reach out to others in need, we experience and act out of kinship and connectedness. When we help someone, we are being true to our basic inner nature. We are being what we are intended to be as created by God — sisters and brothers to one another. We are, by nature, to be altruistic.

Yet, there's another force at work in us sometimes. We do not always reach out to help others. Why do we hold back? We know help is needed, but there are times we are reluctant to give it. Like the priest and Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, we pass by on the other side.

At other times, we give help grudgingly or half-heartedly, or we complain about having to help. There is within each of us the conflict between generosity and holding back, between self-sacrifice and self-protection. Someone said to me, "Sometimes I help, and sometimes I don't. I hold the door open for the person behind me, or I rush through preoccupied. I vote, but not always. When solicitations come through the mail, some catch my eye and heart, and I send at least something. Other requests, I put into the wastebasket as junk mail. A friend is having a difficult time, and I think I should phone, but sometimes I don't." Why this is, I'm not sure.

Usually, those closest to us get an immediate hearing. The suffering of people more remote gets sporadic attention. We're only vaguely aware of it — it's out there somewhere.

Today, there are so many demands for help, it's difficult to decide among them. Battered children? Human rights victims? Those facing discrimination? Endangered species? Starving people? We are told that if we don't support education and the arts, we will all be the poorer for it. This matter of helping can be complicated and confusing.

The story today from the Bible is about helping and not helping. A large crowd had been following Jesus, intrigued by his teachings. It was getting late, and he knew they would be hungry, and many had no food. So he said to one of his disciples, “Do you have any suggestions for feeding all these people?”

His question got two different responses. One response was, “It’s too big a problem. Don’t worry about it. It’s not our concern.” Another response was, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what is that little bit when there are so many to be fed?”

The disciples must have felt the way we often feel today when faced with seemingly insurmountable problems. We look at the world, listen to the news, and see a steady stream of images of misery: homeless people, millions dying of AIDS, people starving, victims of disasters. The list goes on. We wonder, “What can we do to help?” And then we tell ourselves, “I’ve got my own life to live and my own problems to solve. What are five loaves and two fish among so many?” And so we hold back, feeling that what we have to offer isn’t even worth mentioning.

But in the story, there’s another response. A young boy in the crowd offered his small lunch to one of the disciples to give to Jesus. Maybe he overheard the discussion between Jesus and his disciples, but he didn’t stop to consider whether what he had to offer would be useful. He wanted to help. He gave what he had. He did what he could.

Think of the story he had to tell his parents that evening when he got home, with shining eyes and flushed cheeks — of the miracle he and Jesus had done together. He understood the message of Jesus better than anyone.

What does this story tell us about helping one another? What does it tell us about God?

The first point is simple: Do not hold back your help because you’re afraid it won’t be enough. It’s always better to light one candle than to curse the darkness. If you can’t do everything, at least do what you can.

This story tells us that when we offer what we have, as the young boy did, God takes our little bit and makes it into something beyond what we imagined.

Years ago in Philadelphia, a little girl came to Sunday School and asked to be taken into one of the classes. The church was small and the classes were full. Her desire to find a place in that Sunday School sparked a zeal to see the church grow. She began saving pennies to help build a bigger church. Not too long after, she passed away, but under her pillow was found an old red pocketbook with 57 pennies and a note explaining why she was saving them.

The minister shared her story, and it spread. Her 57 pennies grew into a fund that eventually became $250,000, which helped build a larger church, a hospital, and what is now Temple University. The miracle of five loaves and two fish continues to happen when someone wants to do what they can.

The second point is this: we help because it’s the right thing to do. Our help may not always be appreciated or understood. Sometimes it will be refused. The Christian faith teaches us to help anonymously, expecting nothing in return.

The young boy in today's Bible story didn't offer his lunch for credit or praise. He simply wanted to help. He did what he could. His name isn't recorded in the Bible, and most of the people who ate that day didn't know who started it.

Finally, sometimes it may seem that our help is wasted. But that shouldn't stop us from helping. The fact is, some seeds we plant will not grow, but that should not keep us from continuing to plant.

The young boy wasn't thinking about success or failure. He just wanted to help.

Can I help? Yes, you can. Amen.