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 often times without asking for it and sometimes without knowing where the help came from.

There are times too when helping simply happens in the ordinary course of events. It's not something we think about or plan, but merely the instinctive response of a caring person. There's an enormous amount of goodwill resident in most human beings.

It's almost like a reflex. Someone slips, your arms go out. A car is stuck in the snow, you join others and push. A flood or tornado hits a town and people help each other. Someone at work is feeling depressed and you try to cheer her up or at least say a kind word. It all seems natural and appropriate.

I'm always amazed how quickly a neighborhood or 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 be of help pour in. People seem to sense what's needed, or if we don't and feel momentarily awkward, someone quickly comes up with an idea and it's 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 something 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.

And 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 in a half-hearted way, or we complain because we need to help others. There is within each one of us the conflict between generosity and holding back, between self-sacrifice and self-protectiveness. Someone said to me: "Sometimes I help. At other times I don't. I hold the door open for one behind me, or I rush through preoccupied in thought. 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 waste can as junk mail. A friend is having a difficult time. I think I should phone to see how she is, but there are times when I don't do it." 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.

It seems today that there are so many demands for help. It's difficult to decide among them. Battered children? Human rights victims? Those discriminated against? 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 of people had been following Jesus. They were intrigued with his teachings. It was getting near the end of the day and he knew the people would be hungry and that 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?"

Although it was a different kind of situation, the disciples must've felt like we often feel today in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems. We look at the world. We listen to the news and see a steady stream of images of misery across the globe; homeless people huddled in a doorway; millions dying of AIDS in Africa; people starving; lonely people in nursing homes; a family in mourning because one of them has been killed by a drunk driver; victims of natural disasters. The list goes on and on. We wonder, in the face of such need 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 barley loaves and two fish among so many?" And so we hold back our help. We have so little to offer that it isn't even worth mentioning. I'm sure many in the crowd that day felt that way.

But in the story there's another response. A young boy in the crowd offered his small lunch to one of the disciples so that it could be given to Jesus. Maybe this lad overheard the discussion between Jesus and his disciples. But he didn't stop to consider whether what he had to offer would be of any use. He wanted to help. He wanted to do something. He gave what he had. He did what he could.

We can imagine that this young lad had begged his mother for permission to make a day of it; and that she had told him that he was too young to understand what Jesus would be talking about. But he had kept pestering her and in the end she had given him his way and making a little bundle of food, enough to see him through the day and had let him go along with some neighbors.

I like to think that he got as close to Jesus as he could because he was small and would have difficulty in seeing otherwise. Being nearby, he had overheard the discussion of Jesus with his disciples and had then generously offered his little package of food.

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

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

The first point I've already emphasized but it needs repeating again. Do not hold back your help because you are afraid it won't be enough. It is 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 from the bible tells us that when we do what we can to help; when we give what we have, as did the young man in the story, God takes our little bit and makes it into something we hadn't imagined.

Years ago in Philadelphia, a little girl came to Sunday School and asked to be taken into one of the classes. The classes were full and the church was so small that there seemed to be no place for her. Her desire to find a place in that Sunday School fired her with zeal to see the church made larger, to provide room for more children. Without speaking to anyone, she began to save pennies to help build that bigger church. Not too long after, the little girl died, but under her pillow was found an

old red pocketbook in which were 57 pennies and a scrap of paper on which as written the reason why she was saving her pennies.

The minister who conducted the funeral told the story of those 57 pennies, and it got into the newspapers. What could a little girl's 57 pennies do? They did a lot. The tide of gifts which her example inspired flowed with increasing strength and in six years the 57 pennies had become $250,000 which became the nucleus of yet grander things. Today the Baptist Temple with its Samaritan Hospital and the great Temple University with its thousands of students traces its history back to the remarkable gift of that little girl's devotion. The miracle of the five barley loaves and

two fish because a young boy wanted to do what he could, happens over and over again. "Can I help?" Even though you can't do everything, you can at least do what you can.

Remember this in those moments when you question whether or not you've done anything useful for others, when you wonder whether or not you have anything at all to give? Remember also, in addition to whatever material goods you have to give, you have everything to give--everything. Within each one of us is that eternal spark of God's Spirit. When you give to others, when you reach out to help, you touch that spark of God's Spirit which is in you and in every other person. That spark can grow into a large flame.

Second, this story tells us that we are to do whatever we can, no matter how small it might seem, because it's the right thing to do. It calls forth the highest that is in us. I say this because I know people who now hold back their help because sometime in the past they gave their help and they are sure it wasn't appreciated or they weren't properly thanked or it seemed to them that it was all a waste.

If you give help only because you want appreciation in return, or because you want to be noticed and praised by others, you're doing it for the wrong reason.

There are times when our help will not be

appreciated. Sometimes it will be misunderstood. Sometimes our offer of help even when we have the best of intentions will be refused. There are times when people will benefit from our help and not even be aware of it until later.

The Christian faith teaches us that our giving of help whenever possible should be anonymous, so unknown that our left hand should not know what our right hand is doing.

Lloyd Douglas's novel of many years ago, THE MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION, is about a man who goes about giving help and aid secretly.

The young boy in today's Bible story did not give his lunch because he wanted to receive credit or

praise. He gave it simply because he wanted to be of help. He wanted to do what he could. His name is not recorded in the Bible. He received no thank you notes in the mail and didn't expect any. Most of the people who ate that day had no idea what had happened and who started it.

Remember also that there are times when our attempts to help or our actual help may make people suspicious of our motives. Our actions can be easily misinterpreted. Bishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil said years ago: "I brought food to the hungry and people called me a saint. I asked why people were hungry and the people called me a Communist."

A third issue illustrated by this story is that sometimes your help and mine will seem to be wasted and this can make us reluctant to be of help again. There are times, too, when we cannot see anything positive come from our help in the short run, but in the long run it might prove more beneficial than we had ever imagined. The fact is that some seeds we plant will not grow, but that should not keep us from continuing to plant.

It's wonderful to be completely successful in our helping and to do our best to make that happen, but that is not the primary motivation for being of help in the first place. The young boy in the story was not thinking of failure or success--he simply wanted to do what he could.

Once we accept the fact that the ends of our actions often prove unknowable, we are freer to focus on the process of our work as it's happening. If we do our work and our giving and helping faithfully and to the best of our ability, we can trust God that miracles will happen and in ways we hadn't even considered.

Can I help? Yes you can. Amen.