

“THE BREAD OF DELIVERANCE: VARIATIONS ON A SCENE”

a service of worship

by John S. Ballenger



art by Sharon Rollins

Prelude

Meditation of Preparation

I tend to think it mine.

I like to think that it's deserved —
to do with as I please.

and then God asks me in Scripture:

“what have you, indeed,
that you have not received?”

God, give me all the strength and wisdom I will need
to embrace stewardship —

to cultivate the discipline of being a care taker —
a care giver.

Invocation

Giver of all good gifts —

We take this opportunity to give to You
our profound thanks for Your liberal
and consistent generosity.

We give You heartfelt praise for modeling
a way of living that prioritizes giving.

May we, amidst all our myriad blessings,
cultivate the discipline of cheerfully giving.

Of those to whom much is given,
much will be required.

May we not shirk our responsibility and our privilege —

that of feeding the hungry —

clothing the naked —

caring for the sick and the imprisoned —

of redistributing what we've been given
to those less fortunate.

And may we find in our service the joy and the peace

Jesus proclaimed in living for others.

Amen.

Call to Worship

LEADER: I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole
heart.

PEOPLE: I will give to the Lord the thanks that are due—

LEADER: Due to even the least of these, in whose being
we find the Lord Jesus Christ made manifest.

PEOPLE: And so I give of my money . . .

I give of my time . . .

I give of my resources . . .

I give of my energy . . .

I give of myself.

LEADER: As God has given from the beginning of time
to this very hour,

PEOPLE: so I, too, will seek to give.

First Gospel Reading

Luke 10:30-35

Epistle Reading

2Corinthians 8:1-7

Character One

Two people enter from the back and process to the front carrying a large cardboard box (refrigerator size is best) and place it front and center. The front of the box, which ends up facing the congregation, has on it a very large collage of pictures of food—of recipes—of advertisements for grocery stores and restaurants. On the left and right sides of the box are crosses taking up the entirety of the sides of the box. The two people who carried in the box exit. Character One enters from the back of the sanctuary and moves through the congregation. S/he is dressed in clothes just too big and moves very slowly to the front speaking as s/he goes. She pauses on occasion (leaning against one of the pews.)

I am hungry. I've been hungry for a long time. I don't remember ever not being hungry. Even eating doesn't take away the reality of my hunger. Existence is but a continuous and painful reminder of something essential that's missing. Maybe not so much the food itself—as important as that is—but knowing that food will be there. That ought to be something I should be able to rely on, don't you think? —to trust that there will be food. I do not have that which I require to remain healthy, and I'm not—healthy. I am deprived of that which enables me to grow and flourish, and I don't—grow or flourish. I don't understand the world in which you live. The very idea of eating disorders would infuriate me, if I had the energy. I can't understand the world in which you live. I don't care about the concerns you have. They're not as immediate as mine. Because you define things you want as things you need, I don't get what I need. I try to explain this, but I don't have the will. I am tired. I am empty. I hunger. Feed me. *(S/he sits down behind the box, hidden from the congregation.)*

Hymn of Reflection

“I Surrender All,” or

“We Give Thee But Thine Own,” or

“Take My Life and Let It Be Consecrated,” or

“Because I Have Been Given Much”

Character Two

Two people enter and move the “hunger box” to one side. Character One stays behind the box, hidden from the congregation. Two people then enter from the back and process to the front carrying in another large cardboard box (refrigerator size is best). The front of this box, which ends up facing the congregation, has on it a collage of

clothing advertisements. On the left and right sides of the box are crosses taking up the entirety of the sides of the box. The two people who carried in the box exit. Character Two enters from the back of the sanctuary and moves through the congregation. S/he is dressed in clothes inappropriate for the season and moves to the front speaking as s/he goes. S/he moves quickly and speaks quickly—not too quickly (as if nervous.)

There aren't too many naked people running around. You don't see too many, do you? Have you ever? I mean in a public place. Somewhere where you wouldn't expect to see someone naked? And I'm not talking about “streaking”—some kind of joke—something to attract attention. I'm talking about someone not wearing clothes because they don't have any. I haven't—seen that, that is. Not once. Naked isn't really a problem. (wistfully) But it would be nice to have summer clothes in the summer and not the winter—to have winter clothes in the winter and not summer ones. It would be nice to have a raincoat when it rains. At the very basic level, it has to do with safety—shelter from the elements—enough warmth—not too much warmth. But it also has to do with (and I know it's an odd word, but I do think it's the exact right word)—in another way it has to do with appropriateness. Appropriateness. Not standing out as someone who doesn't fit in. More than that, though—not fitting in. It has to do with the way the world sees me—and thus the way I see the world. It has to do with the way I can interact with people—the way people interact with me. I need some clothes. Clothe me. *(S/he sits down behind the box, hidden from the congregation.)*

Meditation

And now I commend you to God
and to the message of his grace,
a message that is able to build you up
and to give you the inheritance
among all who are sanctified . . .
that by such work we must support the weak,
remembering the words of the Lord Jesus,
for he himself said,
“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”
— Acts 20:32-35

Character Three

Two people enter and move the “clothes box” to the other side as the “hunger box.” Character Two stays behind the box, hidden from the congregation. Two people then carry in a large cardboard box (refrigerator size is best). The front of the box (that ends up facing the congregation) has on it a collage of hospital images—doctors, nurses,

hospital beds—include, if you can, pictures of your local hospital and/or nursing home. On the left and right sides of the box are depictions of broken bread, a pitcher and a goblet taking up the entirety of the sides of the box. The two people who carried in the box exit. Character Three enters from the back of the sanctuary in a wheelchair or on crutches and is moved or moves through the congregation. S/he is dressed in a hospital gown. When s/he gets to the front the person pushing the wheelchair exits or Character Three puts down the crutches and speaks from the front.)

I am sick and tired of being sick and tired. It's actually more than wanting to be healthy again. That would certainly be nice, but that's not the main thing. It's wanting people to see me rather than my disease. I wouldn't mind being sick so much if it didn't change the way everyone seems to treat me. What I am in need of—more than medicine—more than health—is relationship—being a part of a network of friends. I am in need of people who care about me. I want someone to sit down with me—not be in a hurry to leave—someone not there because they feel obligated to be there—someone to tell my story to—someone who will then stay with me and tell me their story. Conditions isolate me. Conditions have taken away my ability to initiate. I must rely on others to come to me. I am imprisoned by the conditions of my being. Come visit me . . . please . . . me—not my sickness. *(S/he sits down behind the box, hidden from the congregation.)*

Offertory/Communion

During the offertory, Characters Four, Five and Six (who are seated in the congregation and look like representatives of the congregation) get up from their seats and move to the front of the sanctuary. When they get to the front, they split up. Character Four goes to the “hospital box.” Character Five goes to the “clothes box.” And Character Six goes to the “hunger box.” Each one removes from his or her pocket or purse a billfold or a check book—each one reaches into the billfold—replaces the billfold in the pocket or purse and as they approach the boxes, they kneel and offer to the box their hands. If one withdraws a checkbook, he or she mimes writing a check before replacing the checkbook in pocket or purse and kneeling in front of their box—extending their hands.

Unseen by the congregation, Characters One, Two and Three are in the exact same position on the others sides of the boxes (kneeling with hands extended). Ideally, each of the boxes, and the two characters in front of and behind the box, are positioned on a large equivalent of a lazy susan so they can be turned clockwise to the side such that the congregation sees the crosses on what was

the right side of the two outside boxes and the communion elements on what was the right side of the center box as well as the two characters mirroring each other with the cross or the communion elements between them. Alternately (and probably!), have one of the persons who places the box, step inside the box so that s/he can rotate it clockwise. The characters in front of and behind the box then have to be in a position in which they can move as the box does.

Get mirrors that fit in the bottom of your offering plates. Get some adhesive lettering and lay out around the circumference of the mirror: “for the hungry,” “for the naked,” and “for the sick.” Place the mirrors with the lettering on them in the bottom of your offering plates and as characters one - six freeze in a tableau at the front, pass the offering plates through the congregation.

Attach the same adhesive lettering (making sure it is easily removable!) to the outside rim of your communion plates (“for the hungry,” “for the naked,” and “for the sick”) and after the offering has been collected, pass the communion plates with wafers/crackers/bread.

A minister goes up to stand next to Characters Three and Four—next to the box with the depiction of the elements of the Lord's Supper.

Sisters and brothers, this is not communion we share. This is not the body of Christ broken for us that we receive. This is not a sharing modeled on the last supper Jesus served his disciples in that upper room. Take a look at the bread you have in your hand. What is it? In your hand is a providing that links us to the children of Israel escaping Egypt. In your hand is the assurance God has always provided for God's children: I am with you and I will provide. In your hand is the bread of deliverance—broken for all God's children. We are created to be in relationship with God and in relationship with our sisters and our brothers, and you hold in your hand that which will deliver you from all that might hinder those relationships. In your hand is the bread God provides for us—a bread we share with each other. Take and eat of it, but beware, it cannot be eaten alone—it cannot be eaten to the exclusion of any. This bread breaks down barriers. This bread creates unexpected and often scary relationships. This bread delivers. Just so you know what you're getting yourself into! *(The minister takes bread and shares it with Characters Three and Four. S/he then shares bread with Characters One and Six and Characters Two and Five. S/he then takes a seat.)*

Character Four

Character Four moves front and center to face the congregation. Character Three comes with him/her.)

I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I mean, I had never realized it, but I always thought of those for whom I gave not as people but as what was missing that I was providing. Food, rent, utilities, clothes—(takes Character Three's hand) a visit. I was always told you were supposed to give without any thought of recompense—give without expectations. That's what I was taught in Sunday School. That's how I understood the Bible. Giving was me meeting someone else's need or wish. Period. A one-way street. Which I guess at least partially explains why I would see someone as a need rather than as a person. And this idea of not getting anything back, in a weird sort of way, kept any kind of relationship from developing. Now it seems to me that the relationship is the point. The need isn't the big deal—the person is. This whole giving thing isn't about meeting needs—it's about meeting people. (Characters Three and Four eat their bread.)

Meditation

Those who try to make their life secure
will lose it,
but those who lose their life
will keep it.
—Luke 17:33

Character Five

—Character Five moves to the front (but to the right of Characters Three and Four) to face the congregation. Character Two comes with him/her.) Appropriate. It's an ugly word in some ways. It implies conditions—parameters of acceptability. This is appropriate—that's not. I guess it makes sense that appropriate can also mean to take away from someone. What we deem appropriate appropriates the dignity of those deemed inappropriate. We appropriate someone's well-being in assessing their being. Somehow that doesn't seem to fit too well with unconditional grace. Jesus deemed people appropriate not conditions—be they socio-economic, physical or even religious. Maybe I need to start thinking in terms of my giving not making people more appropriate, but allowing people to appropriate for themselves what's been taken from them—their right to make their own decisions—their own choices—their right to live their own life. (Characters Three and Four eat their bread.)

Hymn

(one of the hymns not used above)

Character Six

Character Six moves to the front (but to the left of

Characters Three and Four) to face the congregation. Character One comes with him/her.

You are hungry. If I feed you, you still don't know where your next meal is coming from. Why should you be grateful to me—how can you be grateful—until there is trust? My way of life does not acknowledge you. I must change. I must become aware of my own hunger—my hunger for a world in which all persons are acknowledged—my hunger for a world in which all persons are celebrated as appropriate—my hunger for a world in which relationships are sought not just with people like us (for everyone does that) but with people as different from us as different can be. (to congregation) I hunger for a world so different that I, too, will not understand the world in which you live . . . we live. I hunger. (Characters Six and One eat their bread.)

Epistle Reading

2Corinthians 8:8-15

Gospel Reading

Matthew 25:31-36

Doxology

LEADER: I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart.

PEOPLE: I will give to the Lord the thanks that are due—

LEADER: but in giving God thanks through the least of these,

I find that they are due their own thanks,
PEOPLE: for I give of my money, and am enriched.

I give of my time, and receive eternity.
I give of my resources, and find myself resource full.

I give of my energy and am refreshed.

I give of myself to discover more of who I truly am.

Meditation of Commitment

Giving is not something I do.

It's something in which I participate.

Giving is actually a sharing.

And I get as much as I give. And more.

The more I don't give, the less I find out what I truly need.

The more I don't give,

the more of my own needs don't get met.

individuals groan —
and in meeting needs,
my own need
(to meet needs)
is met.

all creation groans —
and in meeting needs,
my own need
(to work towards all needs being met)
is met.

I groan —
and in meeting needs,
my own need
(to acknowledge my need that only God can meet)
is met.

Benediction

What is it, God?

Bread—that is a gift from you.

Bread—that commissions us —
that sends us out into this world —
to change it.

Bread—we share one with another.

Bread—that binds us, sister to brother, brother to sister.

Bread—that is part of the way You continue to create the
world you envision.

What is it, God?

Deliverance.

May it become one with our very being —
part of everything we do.
Amen.

Postlude

The service beyond the service:

- youth and children option: Have your youth or children make the collages on the boxes and take the opportunity to have some conversations with them about the differences between wants and needs—about peer pressure—about what society does to those who don't measure up to its strict norms.
- missions option: Keep the boxes in a prominent place in your church. Fill the "hunger box" with non-perishable food items. Fill the "clothes box" with clothes. Attach a sign up for visitation of the homebound and/or the sick to the "hospital box." Keep your congregation aware of the response by providing a weekly update in your bulletin and/or newsletter until the boxes are full and until all your homebound and sick have received a visit.

—John Ballenger is a pastor in Baltimore, Maryland.
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