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“Sizzler Theology” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (07/28/2024, The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost)

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Let us pray.

Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer and the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

We'd like to say in our tradition here in the Episcopal Church that we can offer lament, just as much as we can offer praise.

We provide space for that.

And so I'd like to start today with the laments for the demise of a once-great American tradition, the buffet restaurants.

I grew up in a small town in Louisiana, and some of my favorite mamas include the first chain buffet restaurants to come to town.

Hound, shonies and rions.

Some of you might know these places, I'm meeting a few nods.

Shonies had a breakfast buffet that was second to none, the crispiest bacon you could imagine.

It was all you could eat for \$5.

And rions, the buffet steakhouse, where you could choose your sides from a lovely palette of colors, including yellow, brown, and occasionally a leaf or two of green.

Most buffet restaurants like this have now expired.

A Vox article sought to explain this in 2019, they say that Carrie Cramp, CEO of the Restaurant Chain Sizzler, and yes, that is her name. Carrie Cramp.

It is since eliminated as buffet in many locations.

She told the Atlantic that her company specifically does not use the term all you can eat.

Instead, they use all you care to eat.

Because as Cramp put it, sometimes guests misperceive these types of promotions, and they take it as a challenge to potentially over-consume, potentially.

That is not what we hope for, she says.

In 2012, Pancho's Mexican buffet shut down almost all of its 40 locations, its corporate offices, its website, and all of its phone lines without any explanation.

Bad things happen in buffets.

Sometimes we don't even know what they are.
And then of course we know what happened in 2020, restaurants everywhere faced big challenges, but especially buffets, since we were not keen on sharing food with complete strangers in that time.
But where the buffet mentality may continue to persist is in our attitude toward our faith and religion.
We tend to imagine a huge buffet of beliefs, and we pick and choose those that are palatable to us, those that make sense to us, and we skip over other things that aren't as appetizing.
I know this in part because I experienced it as a school chaplain.
Often after a service or a Eucharist, I might have a conversation with a student who gave me the buffet.
I liked this, but I didn't like this.
I liked this, but I didn't like this, and oh by the way, I don't believe in God.
Which I generally had one of two responses to.
Why don't you tell me which God you don't believe in?
I probably don't believe in that God either.
Or something like that's okay, God believes in you.
In this buffet style attitude, this smorgasbord of the American religious landscape, we imagine that belief in God is just another menu option.
Something we can make definitive pronouncements about, but it's important to remember that that is not what's happening in Psalm 14.
When this fool, this wicked, impious, vile person says in their hearts, there is no God.
They are not making this buffet style statement.
They are not stating that after examining all the rational explanations for whether or not God exists, they are deciding that the preponderance of evidence suggests, no, God does not exist.
They are not making YouTube videos.
They are not going on Richard Dawkins' style speaking towards.
They are not writing letters to the editors.
They are not the village atheists.
This fool is a person who lives as though God isn't watching.
Who acts as though God isn't watching.
Someone who actually does know in their heart that there is a power, a moral center of the universe, a judge, a right and wrong, but chooses to act as though there isn't.
This is a person like King David in the story of David and Bathsheba, who thinks that they can get away with anything, because they are powerful, wealthy and influential.
This is a person entrusted with the responsibility of caring for God's people, but someone who chooses a path of self-satisfaction and greed instead.
This is a person taking advantage of those who are in need, consuming them as easily and simply as though they were eating bread from a buffet line.
In turning their back on God's people, they are turning their back on

God.

They are acting as though God doesn't exist.

What a contrast we have from this portrayal of the fool in Psalm 14 to the one who is the refuge of sinners, the one who is the healer of the sick, the one who gives life and bread to the hungry, our Lord Jesus Christ.

We saw him last week in the Gospel of Mark as the compassionate Christ,

the one who saw the crowds who were being taken advantage of by the fools of the world, the hermits of the world, the ones who should be shepherding the people but who have walked away from that responsibility.

And now we see him as the one who will feed the people gathered on the hillside.

Jesus steps outside of the economy of scarcity represented by Philip's response,

which is basically, there is no way that this can happen.

We don't have enough money to do this.

And in so doing, he illustrates this overwhelming generosity of God, this over abundant goodness of God, it's always more than enough that people ate and were satisfied.

And the story should in there, it should end with the people eating and being satisfied.

It should end with belief and trust and faith in the God who feeds us and cares for us and provides for us to God, who gives us an unmistakable sign.

And we see the sign and we believe and it should in there, but it doesn't.

Because the people turn into fools again, just as we do.

They can't imagine a God who could feed them and heal them without being a temporal earthly king, someone they think who would be an amazing CEO and manager of this organization.

Wouldn't it be great, they think, if God would show up like this on demand and produce whatever it was that we needed?

Wouldn't it be great if God fit into whatever king-sized box we have for God?

Wouldn't it be great if you could just go to the God buffet and pick and choose the God that suited you best?

The one who did all the things for you that you always wanted.

We are always tempted to make God our own image.

We are always tempted to domesticate or to tame God.

We are always tempted to take God's gifts, guides overflowing grace and mercy and make it into a formula, a program, a technique.

So that we can have the God, we really wanted all along, one that we can control, one that we can understand, one that we can predict, one that we can lead,

one who is not bathed in mystery, a top-notch sign, eye, and cloud and thunder, one who was not hidden in the class of a rock, one who does not come into history as a vulnerable baby and dies as a

miserable failure on a cross.

No, we want one who fits all of our categories, one who we can master. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat and started across the sea to Capernaum.

It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

It is easy enough to believe in the daytime when the bread is flowing, the crowd is around, everyone is joining in, when the miracle is evidence for all to see, it is easy enough when the waters of the sea are still in calm and peaceful, it is much harder in the dark, in the lonely places on our journey across the sea to the next destination.

It is much harder when the sea is rough and the wind begins to whip up.

It is much harder when we have been rowing for three or four miles or 20, and nothing much seems to be happening.

It is much harder when we don't seem to know who or where or when we are going to be saved.

It is much harder when we are terrified, frightened, and alone.

And yet, even though it is much harder in those moments, when Jesus does show up as He does, He doesn't say beautiful, He doesn't judge us for the difficulties we have been facing.

He doesn't condemn us for our fear, but rather says, I am.

Do not fear any longer.

He says, I am here. I have always been here, and I always will be here, even in especially when it is much harder than you expected, even in especially in the dark.

The year was 1999, the year I graduated from college, fresh off of an English degree, I was ready to watch not just movies, but films.

And Paul Thomas Anderson made a really wonderful film. He hasn't made many wonderful films since then, but it's called Magnolia, a sprawling free hour emotional epic with a huge cast of interweaving storylines. Every character in the film is broken in some way, desperately in need of redemption, either because of their own choices or set of uncontrollable circumstances weighing down on them.

And so at the climactic moment of the film, each character facing a terrific crisis, each character in a darkness, they sing lines from any man's song, wise up.

It's not going to stop. No, it's not going to stop till you wise up. So, you know, just make it better, the song implies, just stop doing the thing that is hurting you and the people around you, just take control of the situation, come out of the darkness, sing the light, stop being full.

Wise up. But the final chorus alters the words. No, it's not going to stop. So, just give up.

Now, I think that that's some spiritual wisdom right there, not that we give up in the sense of losing hope, not in the sense that we give up to despair.

I think it's exactly the opposite, that in giving up our sense of control, our illusion that we can just wise up and fix ourselves, that we have our truest and deepest hope of redemption.

In explicitly Christian terms, the author James K. A. Smith puts it this way, the brutal, tri-truth of life he says is this, God is on the other shore, across the sea, but you can't get to the other shore from here.

Not even a map is enough. You might already have realized where you need to go, but the question is how to get there.

So what have God sent a boat? What if the creator captained a ferry from that other shore?

God comes to us in the darkness because it is there that we have lost the illusion of control, the sense that we can fix ourselves.

In the darkness we can most clearly see the sometimes dim but always present light of God's loving presence.

God happens the boat and comes across the waves to rescue us from ourselves, to rescue us from our foolishness, to rescue us from our desire to believe in a guide of our own invention.

700 years ago the great Christian mystic Julian of Norwich had a profound series of experiences in which she had a conversation with God, with Jesus, and I want to close with the words of comfort that she discovered.

God says to her, see, I am God. See I am in all things. I never lift my hands off my works nor ever shall without end. How should anything be in this? Amen.

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