**Sermon, July 28, 2024**

**St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine**

**Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki**

The Legion of Decency ceased to exist in 1978. Did decency end with it? If you grew up as a Catholic from the 30's to the 60's, you couldn't avoid the Legion of Decency. It rated every movie that came out for public release with a rating system that went from A (morally unobjectionable) to B (morally objectionable in part) to C (condemned). Every year around the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (of course) you took a pledge that under the pain of sin you would not go to see any movie on the Condemned list. As practicing Catholics you were also mailed the weekly Catholic newspaper that published the movie ratings every week. Now as a young lad I was fascinated with lists. I poured over the batting averages of the Detroit Tigers regularly but I also looked over the list of movies as well. Not that I went to many and certainly not those in the B or C range but my hyperactive imagination repressed by years of Catholic education had to wonder, "What was in those movies?" Years later I, as I'm guessing most of us did, I found out.

In 1968 the Motion Picture Association of America came up with its own rating system to stave off censorship, G, M, R and X which has evolved over time to the complex system we have today where there are a series of statements to help parents decide whether it is appropriate for their children: language, crude humor, bloody violence, sexual references, some nudity.

Now I thought of these ratings in relation to many of the scripture lessons we have had this summer. You might think of the Bible as being a bit bland, as always being G-rated. Far from the case. In fact, it seemed like the lectionaryt compilers had the summer blockbuster in mind. We started with strong themes of violence with the story of David and Goliath back in June, Where the young David says to Goliath, "I shall strike you down and cut your head off and leave your carcass and the carcasses of the Philistines to the birds and wild beasts". And he proceeds to do just that. This was followed two weeks later when David did his wild dance with little clothing before the Ark of the Covenant ( themes of brief nudity) and in the gospel, Salome, daughter of Herodias, demands before King Herod, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter", more strong themes of violence.

So we come today to the continuing saga of King David; our themes shift from those of strong violence to some nudity and sexual reference. David is captivated by the beauty of Bathsheba and like Goliath and John, he loses his head, not literally but figuratively.

His brain becomes inoperative, he commits adultery and then strategizes the murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite. Perhaps the most famous sin in biblical history; as we recited in our psalm, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God above'.

By contrast, our gospel, despite being one of the most popular of Jesus' miracles and the only one cited in all four gospels, seems to be a G-rated affair that lacks action. There is one common theme as Philip accuses Jesus of losing his head, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little," better translated as "You've got to be out of your mind to think we could buy enough bread to feed this crowd!" And what happens next appears to lack drama as Jesus blesses the loaves and fishes, they get passed around and somehow not only is everyone satisfied but there are even leftovers. The well-fed crowd doesn't exactly get it. They want a king with a scepter and a crown, chariots and horses. They want a summer blockbuster. But Jesus is not that kind of king. He reveals that the true, transformative power of God is at its heart the power of unconditional, self-giving love. And this love is at the basis of our humanity – all aspects of our humanity from the jealousy of Herodias to the greed of Herod to the lust of David, to the compassion of Jesus for a hungry crowd and the willingness of the crowd to cooperate. God uses it all.

I think through the years the focus of this miracle is a bit off. The focus has been on Jesus multiplying rather than the crowd sharing, and being satisfied with less, instead of hoarding. How good are all of us at sharing? How were we as kids and how are we now? As a society we are big on locks, fences, and security systems to protect what is mine. There is a story of a Czech baker in a small village who lost interest in his store, seemed depressed, and closed up the shop. Then one day after a few months, the smell of fresh-baked bread again wafted through the village. But something was odd. As people came into the bakery, the baker handed them a fresh loaf of bread with the following note: "I have to realize that bread belongs to the hungry", and they left without paying. Doctors and learned people of the village pronounced the baker insane and led him away. The baker went with a certain contentment because as he told his little daughter, "My master had always given away bread and gotten into trouble".

Quaker author Parker Palmer tells of his experience of boarding a 6:00 a. m. flight . "Our departure was delayed because the truck that brings coffee to the planes had broken down. After a while the pilot said, 'We're going to take off without the coffee. We want to get you to Detroit on time.' I was up front where all the 'road warriors' sit— a surly tribe, especially at that early hour. They began griping, loudly and at length about incompetence, lousy service, etc. "Once we got into the air, the lead flight attendant came to the center of the aisle with her mike and said, 'Good morning! We're

flying to Minneapolis today at an altitude of 30 feet ... ' That, of course, evoked more scorn from the road warriors. "Then she said, 'Now that I have your attention, I know you are upset about the coffee. Well, get over it! Start sharing your stuff with your seatmates. That bag of five peanuts you got on your last flight and put in your pocket? Tear it open and pass them around! Got gum or mints? Share them! You can't read all of the sections of your paper at once. Offer them to each other! Show off the pictures of kids and grandkids you have on your phones!' "As she went on in that vein, people began laughing and doing what she had told them to do. A surly scene turned into summer camp! "An hour later, as the attendant passed by my seat, I signaled to her. 'What you did was really amazing,' I said. 'Where can I send you a letter of commendation?' "'Thanks,' she said. 'I'll get you a form.' Then she leaned down and whispered, 'The loaves and fishes are not dead.'" How would you rate that one?

**Alternate Collect to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Women's Ordination in the Episcopal Church**

O God of Persistent Grace, you called the Philadelphia Eleven to the priesthood and granted them courage and boldness to respond, thereby opening the eyes of your church to the giftedness and equality of all: grant us so to hear, trust, and follow your Holy Spirit wherever she may lead, that the gifts of all your people may flourish throughout the earth, through Christ our Savior. Amen.

**Loaves and Fishes by David Whyte**

*This is not*
*the age of information.*

*This is* **not**
*the age of information.*

*Forget the news,*
*and the radio,*
*and the blurred screen.*

*This is the time of loaves*
*and fishes.*

*People are hungry,*
*and one good word is bread*
*for a thousand.*