

Reflections from the Pantry



“Pantry” – humdrum kitchen annex or rich treasurehouse?

Blame it on my mother, who’s an incorrigible word freak – even her 6th grade classes knew that if they wanted to avoid a snap quiz, all they had to do was ask her about where a word came from. Or blame it on my own inveterate searching through footnotes and marginalia – if there’s a cross-reference somewhere, I’m the one to go off after it.

In any event, I’ve been mulling over Matthew 14 – the Gospel passage appointed by the Revised Common Lectionary for this past July 27 – for some time now, thinking about storehouses and treasure houses and pantries. It’s the last verse that’s had me pondering:

[Jesus] said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." (Mt. 13.52, NIV)

Our program here is, after all, a pantry – which is, when you think about it, just another word for “storeroom.” But what treasures do we possibly bring out here? We’re dealing with the mundane, the decidedly unglamorous, the stuff that nobody really devotes much energy or attention to (glitzy ads of housewives spiritually and emotionally renewed by their new cleaning solution don’t really reflect any reality I’ve ever come across). What treasures are apt to come about from the toilet paper, the laundry soap, the dish soap, the shampoo?

And yet.... If you’re a devotee of the Food Channel, you’ve met any number of chefs who casually bring forth one ingredient after another from their pantries while chatting about the ingredients they make a point of keeping on hand – fresh, canned, frozen, dried, whatever form they recommend, keep these ingredients on hand, they say, and you’ll be able to produce wonderful meals at the drop of a hat.

We’ve gotten accustomed, these days, to working with prepackaged meals, ready-made dinners, pop-in-the-microwave entrees. We’ve forgotten, many of us, what great variety is possible when we have a few basic ingredients on hand: Eggs, a handful of dried herbs, and perhaps a dash of dried parmesan? One omelet on its way; or perhaps a soufflé. Dried onions, dried mushrooms, a little bit of butter, a handful of pasta, and some chicken stock? A hearty noodle dish that could almost stand on its own. Baking powder, flour, a pinch of salt, some milk, a little shortening? Baking powder biscuits will be up in 30 minutes, tops; and if you’ve got some old, dried cheese around to throw in, they’ll be a gourmet delight!

The pantry of cleaning supplies isn’t quite so mouth-watering, but it’s obviously a great asset in letting us make good use of our pantry of foodstuffs. Clean pans are a whole lot better to cook in; and being able to wash the flour-caked apron or the gravy stained shirt the baby wiped her mouth on, let alone our dress shirt that she used as an extra napkin, is wonderful. Being able to smell the wonderful aroma of garlic or parmesan cheese rather than 3-day-old stale perspiration is also pretty wonderful. It may not be glamorous, but it’s kinda nice.

As I was pondering, though, thinking about this idea of pantry as storeroom as treasure-room, it struck me that we have another pantry to keep well stocked – the pantry of our own spiritual practices. The habits we build – of prayer, of praise, of community, of friendship – are also basic ingredients that we can combine to bring out very rich treasures indeed. The habit of thinking of those around us – family members, friends, colleagues, fellow bus riders, strangers in the street – as people who deserve our courtesy and respect is incredibly valuable in making the world a nicer place to live in. The practice of reusing what we can, and recycling what we can’t, does a great deal to help keep the environment intact. The habit of buying according to what we need instead of what someone else tells us we should want has incredible benefits not only for our own budgets but for our economy, which needs a much more stable basis of need and demand than we’ve been giving it lately.

Pantries of whatever type may seem a very mundane and non-glamorous idea – but they can also yield treasures beyond our wildest imagination.

What are you stocking your pantries with?