



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

July 22, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Themes in Scripture

Today we begin a five-week reading of the sixth chapter of John's Gospel with the story of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves. This story is found in all four Gospels but John places this story at the beginning of the chapter in which Jesus reveals that he is the Bread of Life.

Jesus and his disciples have traveled to Galilee by boat, sometime close to the feast of Passover. A large crowd greets Jesus' arrival, looking for signs, John's term for miracles. When Jesus sees the crowd, he decides to feed them, but first he will test his disciples' faith in him by asking them where they can get food to feed the enormous crowd. The disciples still do not have faith in his power, and instead talk of the impossibility of feeding the crowd. There is only a little food available, but Jesus takes it, blesses it, and distributes it to all who are there. Every man, woman, and child has their hunger fully satisfied.

It is difficult to miss the similarity between the Gospel and the story in the first reading, in which the prophet Elisha feeds a crowd of 100 with only 20 loaves of barley bread. Although Elisha has worked miracles before, his servant was incredulous when instructed to take the little food he had and give it to the crowd. Elisha was obeying the word of God and trusted that God would feed the crowd. The little food feeds all, providing even more than they need.

When the people experienced the miraculous feeding from Jesus - a sign much greater than Elisha's - they hailed him as the great Prophet, the Messiah who had come to save them. Jesus knew they would want to make him king, so he withdrew from them. The next time he encountered the crowds, Jesus would offer them a different kind of bread than the kind they were seeking.

The crowd perceived something powerful when Jesus fed thousands from almost nothing, but they did not understand this sign. He was neither displaying the power of a king nor the promise of prosperity. By giving them bread for their bodies, Jesus was reminding them of God's power, but also the love and care he had for them. Jesus was trying to rouse their spiritual hunger for what he came to share with them: his very own life.

Sunday Readings and Background

Reading I: Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to those who mislead their sheep.

- Preaching just before the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah warns the people that they will lose the land and be driven into exile unless they turn from their evil ways.
- The people do not turn from their evil ways. They and Zedekiah, their ruler, are taken into exile.
- The leaders of the exiled people, like good shepherds, kept the people united and nourished them with hope.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps.23: 1-3, 3-4, 5-6

The Lord is my Shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Reading II: Ephesians 2:13-18

He announced the Good News to those who were far off and to those who were near.

- The Letter to the Ephesians emphasizes the unit between Jews and Gentiles.
- All who are redeemed through Christ are one body in him.
- Christ is the way to peace for all people.

Gospel: Mark 6:30-34

They went to a deserted place to rest.

- The disciples have just returned from their first missionary journey and Jesus knows that they need rest.
- The attempt to get away from the crowds is useless because the people are hungry to hear the word of God.
- Jesus, the Good Shepherd, responds to the people with compassion.

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The Miracle of Sharing

I remember growing up in a family in the mid-1950s into the mid-1970s, and not until the mid-1980s did my parents have an empty nest after my sister and brother left home to marry. Our family was a one-income household, though my Dad worked two jobs until he started his own business. We always had what we needed, but we lived simply. We were three children and their parents living in a five-room house. Our family home was always a place of welcome.

Sometimes, a relative or friend would stop by at dinnertime. Sometimes, we children would bring home friends near dinnertime and ask if they could join us for dinner. Our mom would look at the fish in the pan or the casserole almost ready to come out of the oven and wonder if the food would be enough. Our dad was always certain that we would have enough food for everyone. Surprisingly, we always did have enough food when it was set out on the table because, being conscious of everyone at the table, we shared. At the table, we sometimes had strong disagreements with one another in the midst of our conversations, but always we treated each other with civility in order to preserve the bond of unity among us as a family.

This Sunday's readings focus on sharing and practicing virtues so that the bond of unity can be preserved within the human community and among all its members. The readings remind us that we have all been given of the one Spirit who lives and breathes within us and among us all.

An unnamed servant of the prophet Elisha is hesitant that the 20 barley loaves he brings to the prophet will be enough to feed the 100 people gathered in their vicinity. Elisha, however, is confident that the loaves will be able to provide food for all. So, the servant distributes the loaves. All eat, and in testimony to God's word that the prophet quotes, some bread is left over. What is the miracle here? Is it the fact that 20 barley loaves suddenly multiplied in number or grew in size? Perhaps the miracle is that all the people became truly conscious of one another and took only what they needed from a loaf so that others could also have a share of the bread, with no one going hungry and no one doing without?

Psalm 145 calls upon all creation to give thanks to God. God's faithful ones are to bless God, and everyone is to talk about the magnificence of God's reign and might. The divine reign and power do not speak of a hierarchical domination. The use of divine might is for the sake of the other to satisfy the needs of both human and non-human life and thus bring about the flourishing of all creation that will be a sign of God's reign.

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In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul urges the believing community members at Ephesus to live a life worthy of the call they have received. They are to follow the way of Christ who embodied a virtuous life of love. Paul's words of encouragement highlight specific virtues that the community members are to practice so that they can preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. Diverse as they may be, the people are essentially one body and one Spirit through Christ. Through that communion, they are also united to God whose Spirit remains alive in the midst of all creation. A life lived in humility, with patience and the ability to bear with the other through love also safeguards right relationships and ensures the practice of civility among the community's many members.

The Gospel from John develops the theme of sharing heard earlier in the reading from 2 Kings. Captivated by Jesus' healings, a large crowd follows Jesus, and he wants to feed them, but buying food for such a multitude is impossible. Andrew, one of Jesus' disciples, draws attention to a young boy with five barley loaves and two fish. Andrew notes that such a small amount of provisions is inadequate for the large crowd. Jesus, however, like Elisha before him, is able to feed everyone through the miracle of sharing. All partake of the loaves and fish, and leftovers remain.

In sum, this Sunday's readings describe how life flourishes when virtues are practiced. In a world of both over-consumption on the part of some people and far too many broken relationships, these readings invite us to live simply and virtuously. The readings call us to be forever mindful of others' needs while striving to grow ever more deeply into the divine vision of one body, one family, so deeply loved by one God.

