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God provides

Mary M. McGlone | Jul. 29, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Today?s psalm refrain says that the hand of the Lord feeds us and answers all our needs. Sometimes that seems hard to believe. When we hear of wars, drought, hurricanes, tornados and starving children, one wonders just where the Lord?s hand is in it all. Today?s readings invite us to reflect on this problem.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary

2 Kings 4:42-44

Elisha?s story is part of a series of accounts of the prophet?s miraculous deeds. As we consider it, we should remember that in Scripture, a ?miracle? does not so much break the laws of nature as offer a sign to be interpreted in the light of faith. The author of 2 Kings offers precious little detail about this incident; we do not know why 100 hungry people gathered together, only that Elisha and his skeptical servant saw them. We also know that a farmer donated grain and barley loaves.

Ephesians 4:1-6

John 6:1-5

Elisha immediately set out to give away the gift. His servant offered a sensible, pragmatic protest: If there were 100 hungry people, 20 loaves and some grain were hardly a solution! Obviously, they should keep that modest store for themselves. But Elisha assured his servant that their God would provide even more than they needed. And so it happened.

Obviously, John?s account of the miraculous sharing harkens back to the Elisha story. This, the most repeated story in the New Testament, is related six times. John adds a discourse to relate it to the Eucharist. His Last Supper narrative will speak not of bread and wine, but of washing each other?s feet.

According to John, Jesus sees the multitude and expresses concern for their sustenance. He asks Philip, a man from that region, where they could buy food. Philip, sounding almost rebellious, points out that they could never afford to respond to so great a need. Andrew, whether in jest or with sincerity, mentions that he had seen a child with some loaves and fish. Knowing that, Jesus directs the disciples to organize the crowd.

Now we hear the echo of the institution narratives: ?Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them.? In a detail that might confound our eucharistic theology, Jesus also gave them ?as much of the fish as they wanted.? What had happened? Was this a scene we might see in one of the films about Jesus in which the loaves seemed to be multiplying in the baskets like corn popping out of the pan? We have no video of the scene, so we really don?t know exactly how it happened. We do, however, know that the crowd wanted to make Jesus their

king, hoping that he would give them everything they wanted. Jesus, knowing that was not what they needed, escaped into solitude.

A number of years ago, I was thinking about this section of John as I took what was supposed to be a 14-hour bus ride from Lima to Arequipa, Peru. Knowing that 14 hours was an optimistic estimate, everyone boarded that bus with provisions for whatever mishap might come our way. Of course, the bus broke down. We sat for more than an hour as the sun began to heat up the bus. No one was allowed off, everyone was crabby, hungry and thirsty.

I had one orange hidden in my otherwise depleted food pack. I realized that there was no way I could secretly peel an orange on a hot bus. I waited until I was desperate. Then I pulled out the orange and immediately felt the toddler on Mom?s lap next to me look and lean into my seat. I peeled the orange and offered mother and child a couple of sections. People started to look at me, so I shared more. Finally, I was left with one section for myself. Then the woman in front of me said, ?I have some bread, but it would make us too thirsty. A young man said, I have a liter of Coke. Little by little, the bus became the scene of a picnic potluck, each sharing what they had hidden and receiving from one another. And it all got started with an orange.

I can?t claim that our bus ride repeated Jesus? miracle with the loaves, but there are similarities. Everyone was hungry; no one had enough to meet the need. In Jesus? case, one child gave all that he had. In our case, each opened up their hidden store and we found that among us there was more than enough. Interpreting both stories, it seems to me that the key is that when we give out of our scarcity, we will find that there is enough. In Paul?s words, we will be living ?in a manner worthy of our call? and we will understand how the hand of the Lord feeds us.

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