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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.

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.

2 KINGS 4:42-44

This reading from Kings opens with an unnamed man from Baalshalishah bringing the prophet Elisha 20 barley loaves made from the first fruits and fresh grain in the ear. Baalshalishah is a village in the hill country of Ephraim (1 Samuel 9:4). Nothing is known about this small village except that the site may be modern Khirbet Sirisya, southwest of Shechem. In the ancient world, Shechem was a city in the heartland of the Ephraimite hill country (Joshua 20:7). The barley loaves offered to Elisha are made from the finest grains. The biblical writer makes no statement as to why the man brings these choice loaves to Elisha. Most likely the offering is a gesture of gratitude, affection and honor. Oftentimes, food served as payment for services rendered by the prophets (1 Kings 14:3).

Elisha receives the bread but surprisingly, he does not eat it or save it for himself. Instead, he wants the bread to be shared among a hundred people who are surrounding his house. Filled with consternation, the man objects to Elisha's command. Elisha issues his command a second time and now with more insistence. Elisha complements his second command with a prophetic word that begins with the phrase, "For thus says the Lord." This phrase is known as a prophetic messenger formula used to lend authority to the divine message about to be proclaimed by a prophet. The statement that Elisha utters is a quote and perhaps a reference to the manna narrative of Exodus 16. The man distributes the bread among the people. They all eat, and astonishingly, some bread is left over.

The common interpretation of this story is that the prophet Elisha has shown his power as a true prophet of God. Elisha has uttered a divine word, and that word is fulfilled. Only divine words proclaimed by "true" prophets come to fruition. The words proclaimed by false or corrupt prophets are nothing more than wind. Even though this interpretation is one possibility, another possibility from the perspective of the people and not the prophet is the power of sharing. The point that some bread was left over after all had eaten demonstrates that no one over-consumed. People took what was sufficient and were mindful that 100 of them had to eat from 20 loaves. The virtues of mindfulness and sharing led to an abundance for all. In a world where countless people go hungry every night while some others have to jog off their super-sized meals and compost their many leftover scraps, this reading from 2 Kings offers much food for thought.

PSALMS 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18

Within the Psalter, Psalm 145 is a song of praise intended for a royal feast. The psalmist pays tribute to the great and wonderful deeds of God who is powerful, merciful and beneficent. With gusto, the psalmist addresses God directly. The psalmist wants all God's works to give God thanks and all God's faithful ones to bless God. He also wants everyone and everything to talk about the glory of God's kingdom — God's reign — and to speak about God's might. Why should God's works thank God? Why should all creation talk about God's reign and speak about God's might? Who is this God who is deserving of such praise? What has this God done to warrant thanks? The psalmist gives no indication until the second stanza of psalm as to why such praise, thanksgiving and respect is due to this God.

The second stanza of the psalm is the most important of all three stanzas because it describes vividly Israel's God who is known by divine deeds of goodness. Creator God who brought all creation into being is also the One who sustains all creation. The phrase "the eyes of all look hopefully to you" echoes Psalm 104 where the psalmist describes in great detail how God provides for all that exists. Each element in creation, in turn, becomes a source of sustenance for all other aspects of creation. For example, God waters the trees abundantly, and in them the birds build their nests (Psalm 104:16-17). Just as all the creatures in Psalm 104 look to God to provide for them, so now everyone in Psalm 145 looks hopefully to God to provide for them. Once again, the psalmist addresses God directly and extols God's wonderful deeds that flow from a spirit of great love and kindness. The psalmist describes God anthropomorphically: "You give them their food in due season; you open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Psalm 145:16).

At the time the psalmist was writing the psalms, Israel's God was understood to be king of kings, enthroned in the heavens. Israel's God was Lord of creation and Lord of history. Unlike many of Israel's earthly kings who were corrupt from the beginning of the monarchy in the 10th century B.C.E. to the monarchy's demise around 587 B.C.E., the psalmist portrays God as a king who rules benevolently and provides for all. The psalmist makes clear that because of God's goodness, the glory of God's kingdom shines forth. This regal God who is head over all governs by dominion and not by domination.

In stanza three, the psalmist now addresses a wider audience. Having reflected with God on God's goodness, the psalmist now proclaims to all who are listening that Israel's God is just in all ways and holy in all works. Because the psalmist has seen how God provides for all, the psalmist is able to state with confidence that God is near to all who call.

In this psalm, the psalmist makes clear why Israel's God is deserving of praise and thanksgiving. Furthermore, for the psalmist, justice and holiness are not only virtues but also ethical practices. Godliness is more than a quality. Godliness is a lived experience. Finally, this regal king uses divine might to answer the needs of all. What a striking example this royal image of God is for world leaders today. Many of the world's leaders are mired in self-interest, self-serving power and self-centeredness, while the voices of so many people go unheard, and their needs go unmet.

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

This portion of Paul's letter to the Christian community at Ephesus is an exhortation. Paul, the so-called author of this letter, urges his brothers and sisters in Christ to live a life of virtue in order to preserve the unity among them through the bond of peace. By living such a life, they will not only bear witness to the call they have received but also attest to the truth that there is one body, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God of all who is over all, in all and through all.

The image of Paul as a prisoner for the Lord is a common one in Pauline literature (Ephesians 3:1; Colossians 1:10). The exhortation to lead a worthy life echoes Jewish understanding of divine election. Humility, gentleness and patience are the virtues that comprise a worthy Christian lifestyle. In the context of the first century C.E. Greco-Roman world when this letter would have been written and read, these virtues were not generally heralded virtues of the Roman society. Gentleness may have been accepted in some circles, but humility and patience were considered weaknesses and even vices in Greco-Roman society. The virtues prized by Romans were courage, justice, temperance and prudence. Within second Temple Judaism and subsequently in early Christianity, however, humility, gentleness and patience had become well-established virtues. Humility was associated with servility.

Paul's directive that the community members bear with one another through love highlights what Paul considers to be the greatest of all virtues — love. For Paul, love is the true culmination of the Law (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14). Practicing humility and gentleness within a loving context would help maintain unity within the multiethnic community. The fact that Paul admonishes the community members to bear with one another suggests that not all the Christians at Ephesus were on the same page with each other. They were at different stages of faith and growth. They had diverse temperaments and differences of opinions. Diversity was to be celebrated and was never meant to be a stumbling block toward or for unity.

Finally, Paul uses a series of credal statements to unpack the meaning of unity. Thus, a life of virtue grounded in love is essential to Christian unity and union with God.

JOHN 6:1-15

The 2 Kings narrative sets the stage for John's Gospel that features Jesus feeding 5,000 people with five barley loaves and two fish. Seeing the crowds gathering around him, Jesus expresses his desire to feed all the people. In contrast to the synoptic accounts of this story (Matthew 15:33; Mark 6:37; 8:4), Jesus takes the initiative. By posing a simple yet rhetorical question to Philip, he advances his concern for the people: "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?" (John 6:5). Jesus' question is similar to the one Moses asked of God in the desert (Numbers 11:13).

The notion of Jesus' question being a ploy to test Philip, followed by the statement that Jesus knew what he was going to do, is a comment made by the Gospel writer who seems to be providing some sort of analysis of the situation at hand. Such comments tend to muddle the essential story rather than providing clarity. Jesus' question to Philip is a genuine one. Philip's response to Jesus is also genuine. The crowd is vast. Feeding everyone is humanly and financially impossible.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, offers a possibility, but even five barley loaves and two fish will not be sufficient to feed the crowd. Interestingly, both of today's passages from 2 Kings and John mention the same kind of bread. Elisha's servant fed 120 people; now Jesus will feed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish.

Once again, because the people share, scarcity becomes abundance and mindfulness guards against overconsumption. After feeding everyone and always wanting to stay "under the wire" in order to continue his mission and ministry, Jesus retreats to the mountain. In the biblical world, mountains are frequent places of solace, solitude, prayer and the encounter with God.

This Sunday's readings remind us that we live in a world of abundance. When the global human community learns to share and embrace a life of virtue, maybe then world hunger can be eradicated. Such "miracles" happened once; they can happen again.

Planning: 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Many people take vacations during the summer, and it seems like the evangelist Mark needs a break, too. Because Mark's Gospel is the shortest, we take five weeks each summer in Cycle B when we draw on the Gospel of John instead. Notice that last week's Gospel ended with Jesus teaching a vast crowd. The next verse in Mark begins his account of the miraculous feeding of that multitude. So, our first passage from the sixth chapter of John begins with a similar feeding of a multitude.

That Gospel is linked, of course, to the first reading which recounts a less dramatic but similar event in the life of Elisha. He only feeds a hundred people, but that's still impressive with only five barley loaves.

These five weeks offer a wonderful opportunity to help the parish deepen its understanding of and appreciation for the Eucharist. Preachers and planners might begin by sitting down and looking over the readings for all five Sundays. Then discuss what aspects of the Eucharist need attention in your community. What parts of the Mass do people seem to misunderstand? What actions of the assembly need improvement? Then see which weeks fit best with which issues for preaching and catechesis.

Of course, if there are ritual problems (e.g., sloppy movements by liturgical ministers, poor proclamation of the word, music that does not relate to the readings or feast, etc.), planners may want to focus attention on such concerns as well.

It may be worthwhile to make an announcement at the beginning of Masses this weekend to inform the assembly of this shift to John's Gospel and the continuity of these five Sundays. One of the challenges with any Lectionary is that passages are read without the context from which they are taken. Since we get most of the sixth chapter of John in these five weeks, we have a context for them. People may be able to draw more from these texts if they are aware of their connections.

Some texts from the Missal today are somewhat problematic. The prayer over the offerings asks that “these sacred mysteries may sanctify our present way of life.” While there is probably a correct way to understand that line, it sounds like blessing however we are living, whether it is in accord with the Gospel or not. It might be wise to drop the words “way of.” The prayer after Communion speaks of “the perpetual memorial of the Passion.” It would be better if it read “the Passion and Resurrection of your Son.” One wonders how many people really hear these texts, but it behooves us to at least make sure we are praying appropriately and intelligibly.

Prayers: 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Peg Ekerdt

Introduction

When we are tempted to think we go it alone, when we doubt that God will hold us up and sustain us, we should take another look at the Scriptures for this 17th Sunday in Ordinary time. They are yet one, more clear directive to believers of how to live. Bear with one another, strive for humility and patience, preserve unity among us and trust that the Lord will feed and sustain us. When we feel overwhelmed and the path forward is not clear, we must not forget that our work is really the Lord’s and he will provide what we need.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you promise to feed us all our days: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are our hope and our salvation: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, your abundant love is eternal: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for the needs of this gathered community and for our world.

Minister For the church, for Pope Francis and for all of us — for faithfulness among us to be a eucharistic people, to share what we have to feed and sustain those most in need ... we pray,

- For leaders of nations, especially our own, for all places in our world where violence destroys human dignity, for laws and policies that protect all of life, from the womb until death ... we pray,
- For courage to build bridges of understanding among people — patience to accept human imperfection and humility to envision a world at peace, we pray,
- For those who worry about many things, for surrender and for trust in the Lord to feed us and sustain us ... we pray,
- For those who work the land and farm our fields, for all whose efforts nourish humankind, for renewed commitment to care for the earth, God’s gift to us ... we pray,
- For the sick of the parish, for those who live with addiction or face depression, for families who love them ... we pray,

Presider Loving God, source of all life, hear our prayers. Help us surrender to your grace so that we, who are fed at your table, may feed others who yearn for your peace. Fill our hunger with your love, transform our worries with your grace. Send us forth to live the faith we profess. We ask this in the name of your Son. Amen.

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