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August 3, 2014

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In a sermon on the feeding of the vast crowd in a deserted place, the late Peter Gomes insisted that the message of this miracle is clear: It is not the will of God that people should go hungry (Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, William Morrow and Co., New York: 1998). Repeated six times in the four Gospels, the feeding of the multitude attests to the fact that Jesus met people's real needs. He fed the hungry, said Gomes, not with metaphors but with food, not with resolutions and presidential commissions but with so much bread and fish that there was an abundance left over. Jesus met their physical needs in a generous manner so that, their physical hunger satisfied, he could then address the hunger of their hearts. Through his action, Jesus acknowledged that there is a real connection between the hunger of the body and the hunger of the soul. Both the physical and spiritual needs of humankind are God's concern.

Jesus' action and his generosity were reminiscent of several similar events concerning food that are preserved in the Hebrew scriptures. One of those is featured in today's first reading, where Deutero-Isaiah, speaking for God, invites the poor to come, eat, drink and be satisfied. Only after their physical hunger has been addressed does the Lord invite: "Come, listen and be renewed in the everlasting covenant. Come, enjoy all the benefits assured to David." Not the least among those

benefits was the promise of God's protective presence, forever.

From the beginning, our faith ancestors regarded food as God's gift. Recall the many fruit trees in the primordial garden of Eden (Gen 2). Recall the manna, quail and water from the rock that sustained the desert wanderers en route to Canaan. That land of God's promise was always described in terms of food — a land flowing with milk and honey. As Gail Ramshaw has explained, that description assured the hungry and the hopeful that their future homeland would have good food, both staples and treats, in abundance (Treasures Old and New, Augsburg Press, Minneapolis: 2002).

Israel's sapiential literature also contains invitations to banquets. In Proverbs (Ch. 9), Wisdom is portrayed as a generous hostess, spreading a table with meat and wine. She invites, "Come and eat ... let whoever is simple turn in here!" Then she proceeds to feed those who hunger for God. Surely, the evangelists recognized Jesus and his desire to feed the hungers of others as Wisdom-made-flesh. In that capacity, Jesus fed others through his gift of bread in the wilderness, through the bread of his teaching and, ultimately, through the gift of himself as Living Bread in the Eucharist. As we celebrate Jesus' gift on a weekly (or daily) basis, Gail Ramshaw (op. cit.) voices the hope that this shared sacred meal will become more of what it was meant to be: a realistic image of God's gift of food, a profound symbol of the messianic banquet and an opportunity to share the "leftovers" with those who could not be present. Moreover, the weekly Eucharist also challenges all who are fed to give not of their surplus but of their substance to feed the hungry of this world, not once in a while, not only on holidays (Thanksgiving, Christmas), but on a daily basis.

Mother Teresa tried to impress upon her sisters the importance of following Jesus' lead in tending to physical hungers first, and then the spiritual needs of the poor. She told them, "Charity begins today. Today, somebody is suffering. Today, somebody is in the street. Today, somebody is hungry. Our work is for today. Yesterday has gone, tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today to make Jesus known, loved, served, fed, clothed, sheltered. Do not wait for tomorrow. Tomorrow, we will not have them if we do not feed them today" (The Joy of Loving, compiled by Jaya Chalika and Edward Le Joly, Penguin Group, New York: 2000). Mother Teresa lived and served with a generosity and an urgency that continue to challenge the church long after her death. Her example, along with that of so many others similarly devoted to ending hunger, calls forth the best in us. If people die of starvation, she said, it's not because God didn't care for them. It is because you and

I were not instruments of love in the hands of God to give them bread, because we did not recognize him when, once more, the hungry Christ came in distressing disguise. What can we do today?

ISAIAH 55:1-3

As he concluded his message of comfort to his fellow exiles in Babylon, Deutero-Isaiah (Chs. 40-55) conveyed, in God's name, an invitation so appealing that only a fool would have refused. How exciting must his invitation have been for those who had long been suffering from shame and seeming alienation from God. Their unfaithfulness to God and their breach of the terms of the covenant had, according to the prophet's interpretation of events, resulted in the forfeiture of the blessings of the covenant: their land and their status as an independent people. Their conquest by the Babylonians and subsequent exile had been well deserved, according to the prophet. But now, all that was about to end. Cyrus the Persian, called "God's anointed" (Isa 45:1) and "my [God's] shepherd who fulfills my every wish" (Isa 44:28), issued an edict concerning the displaced people from other lands being held in Babylon. By virtue of that edict, all were free to return to their own homelands. What better way to celebrate their freedom, their reconciliation with God and their restoration to Judah than with a great banquet?

Banquets and banquet imagery figured importantly in Israel's sacred traditions. People in the ancient world used food and drink as nourishment but also as a form of communication. Sharing at table was thought to create a bond between those who broke bread together. To do so in the presence of God was to affirm the relationship with which God blesses all who have been called into being. Banquets were regarded as more formal and important occasions, and the messages communicated at banquets were far more significant than those at ordinary meals.

From the beginning of its history as a people, banquets affirmed and reaffirmed God's love for Israel. With a feast, Israel celebrated their passage from slavery in Egypt to freedom as an identifiable people. Lambs were slaughtered, bread was baked and shared, and the story of their redemption was told. Because the Exodus was so pivotal an event in their history, the Israelites celebrated annually. Gradually, the pastoral and agrarian feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread were historicized and celebrated in remembrance of God's salvific actions among them. To celebrate the ratification of the covenant with the Lord at Sinai, a great feast was prepared and enjoyed by all in God's presence (Exod 24:5-11).

In later centuries, as longing for a worthy messiah-king grew more eager, the age of the messiah was often described in terms of a great feast at which all the peoples of the earth would be in attendance. There, on the mountain of the Lord, rich food and choice wines would be enjoyed in abundance (Isa 25:6-8; 65:11-15) by all who remained faithful to God.

Centuries later, when Jesus appeared feeding the multitude, his actions stirred the messianic expectations of his contemporaries. Only later would it be understood that the giver of bread would also become Bread to feed the hungers of all humankind.

ROMANS 8:35, 37-39

More like a treatise than a letter, Paul's correspondence with the house churches in Rome introduced him to a community he had not founded but with whom he intended to stay and visit before heading to Spain to preach the good news. Because the circumstances of his sudden conversion and his outreach to the gentiles aroused suspicion in some, Paul sought to clarify his purpose and position by setting forth what he held to be true about Jesus and his salvific mission.

Today's pericope is part of Paul's eloquent presentation on the blessings of life in Christ. Called, redeemed, justified and bound for glory, believers begin their new life at baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6:1-14). Once they were enslaved to sin, but the bonds of slavery have been broken, and believers are free to enjoy life in Christ (6:15-23). Those who are in Christ are also free from the burden of the law and, through God's grace, are supported in their struggle to do good (7:1-25). Freed by grace, believers can live in the Spirit who dwells within, bringing light, life and holiness (8:1-30).

Given all these gifts, can anyone doubt the love of God that has been shown to us in Jesus? Indeed, as Paul said earlier, "Christ died for us while we were still sinners!" (5:8). If sin cannot separate us from the love of God and the love of Christ, then nothing can. Sin is the ultimate barrier, yet even sin fades into distant memory before the forgiving and redeeming love of Christ. So the list of seven troubles and sufferings enumerated by Paul in v. 35 will also fade and disappear. The believers in Rome were becoming increasingly familiar with such struggles due to pressure from both civil (Rome) and religious spheres. Nevertheless, through it all, Paul promised the presence of God's love and an overwhelming victory through him who loved us.

In his second series of obstacles (vv. 38-39), Paul reached beyond the temporal sphere of existence to the realm of spiritual beings. By the second half of the first century C.E., a highly developed angelology had evolved among the Jews. According to the rabbis, there were three levels of angels: (1) thrones, cherubim and seraphim; (2) powers, lordships and might; (3) angels, archangels and principalities. These angelic beings were created by God to care for and guard human beings, but, as the rabbis suggested, some angels had become resentful of God's involvement with humankind and exercised a certain hostility toward humans. According to a rabbinic legend, when God appeared on Sinai to give the law to Moses, God was attended by a host of angels who begrudged Israel the gift of the law and assaulted Moses, and would have stopped him had God not intervened. Even these powerful albeit jealous messengers of God could not separate us from the love of God, assured Paul. Nor could anything present or to come. Height and depth referred to stars at their rising and at their zenith. Not even astrological powers can separate us.

With so many assurances, how can we not rejoice in the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?

MATTHEW 14:13-21

As mentioned in the introduction, the narrative of the feeding of the many is repeated six times within the four Gospels. The story has been shaped in a number of ways and given various contexts by the sacred authors, but the essential message of the event remains the same: Jesus, like the God of their ancestors in the faith, could satisfy the deepest needs and hungers of his people.

Readers of these narratives cannot help but recall similar events when God fed the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 16:3-14). In a deserted place, with no resources of their own, the desert travelers looked to God and were fed with manna, quail and water from the rock. Readers will also be reminded of those instances when God's prophets provided food when there was none. Elijah ensured that a widow's jar of flour and jug of oil would not run out (1 Kings 17:7-16). Elisha provided an unending supply of oil to ensure a widow's survival (2 Kings 4:1-7) and then fed 100 men with 20 small barley loaves (2 Kings 4:42-44).

In addition to these references from the exodus and prophetic narratives, Matthew's account also included messianic allusions. By mentioning the detail that the crowds were told to sit on the grass in that deserted place, the evangelist bolstered the

hopes of those who awaited a messiah of David's line who would bid them lie down in meadows of green grass while he spread a table before them (Psalm 23). Several other aforementioned prophetic and sapiential texts associated the era of the messiah with food in abundance for God's people.

Then too, there are eucharistic overtones present in this narrative. While it is generally accepted that the eucharistic terminology (took, looked up to heaven, blessed, broke, gave) is probably a redactional feature, it cannot be denied that the early believers in Jesus regarded this event as eucharistic, if not in character, at least in sign. Although some Christians tend to regard only the Last Supper as having eucharistic significance, it has become increasingly clear that the evangelists read eucharistic significance into Jesus' feeding of the many as well as in the meals he shared with his own after his resurrection. Perhaps the omission of an account of the Eucharist at the Last Supper by the Johannine evangelist and his lengthy discourse on the Bread of Life in his Chapter 6 are the best attestations to this idea.

Through the centuries, the wondrous event with the loaves and the fish has accrued a variety of interpretations, some of which downplay Jesus' actions in an effort to dilute its miraculous nature. However, the facts are plain. Those who were privileged to share in Jesus' gift of food were fully satisfied, and an abundance remained. Jesus made it clear that he expected his disciples to be similarly concerned about human hunger and to be actively involved in tending to the needy: "Give them some food yourselves." Through his words and actions, Jesus heralded a new era wherein past traditions, messianic hopes, eucharistic concerns and community caring were summed up in his very person. Those same concerns, hopes, traditions and caring have become the responsibility of those who are privileged to call themselves his own.

Planning: 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Our first reading this Sunday invites us to come to the water; to come, eat grain and drink wine and milk. Later, the invitation is summarized as an opportunity to "delight in rich fare." This text might prompt planners to look at whether the assembly is being fed rich fare or only minimum rations.

One place to start is in evaluating the quality of the bread and wine used at Mass. Is it truly rich fare? Is the wine of good quality? It doesn't have to be expensive, but it should be a wine that most people find pleasant. Have you ever asked members of the assembly to rate the wine? And is the bread good bread? It's hard to imagine little wafers as rich fare.

That might raise the question of whether you could make your own bread for the Eucharist each week. A bread-baking ministry takes some organizing and supervising, but it can make a big difference in the richness of this central symbol at the Eucharist.

There are recipes available that stick strictly to Rome's rule that only flour and water be used. But it's also important to remember that liturgical rules have a hierarchy of importance. The norm stated in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal is more fundamental than any particular recipe: "The meaning of the sign demands that the material for the Eucharistic celebration truly have the appearance of food." It also notes that the bread should have been "recently baked" (cf. #320-21). The typical hosts fulfill neither of these requirements, even though the General Instruction adds that they are still acceptable when "pastoral needs require it."

Organizing a bread-baking ministry may require some trial and error, testing different recipes and learning how to avoid making the bread too tough or too dry. This is a good way to involve some people who may not feel qualified to be lectors or cantors or who may just prefer to serve in the background rather than before the whole assembly.

It is also important to figure out how to keep the bread fresh, what to do if you consecrate more than is needed (it might best be consumed by the ministers after Communion or after Mass) and how to provide for Communion to the sick and dying (you might consecrate a small number of hosts, since they keep better in the tabernacle).

Moving to use real bread will also require some catechesis. People are so used to the hosts that they may wonder if real, unleavened bread is even allowed. Beyond assuring them that it is, catechesis should help people deepen their appreciation of this symbol and of the meaning of breaking the bread and sharing from a common loaf rather than individual hosts.

Prayers: 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Paige Byrne Shortel

Introduction

Today's Gospel is both comforting and challenging. Comforting, because it is a story about God providing our most basic needs. Challenging, because we are called to believe that with God there is enough — indeed, more than enough. Let us call on God's mercy for those times when we fear to share our blessings and fail to trust that God will provide what we need.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you nourish us with your word: Lord, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you feed us with your own body: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to proclaim your word and share our bread with others: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We have heard the Gospel story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Let us join together to pray for the feeding of the world's hungry and for those who are trying to find ways to share their abundance.

Minister For Christians everywhere who preach the Gospel of Jesus, advocate for those with no voice, feed the hungry, heal the sick, teach, counsel and guide those who are seeking God ... we pray,

- For the creation of a society where all have food, shelter, medical care, the ability to provide for their children and live with hope for the future ... we pray,
- For those without enough to feed, clothe and house themselves; for those with the means, but without the knowledge or skills to make a decent life; for those with plenty who are looking for ways to share their abundance ... we pray,
- For the sick: for those with heart disease, emphysema, allergies and eating disorders, and all who are especially burdened by the summer heat ... we pray,
- We remember those who have died ... (names). For those who are mourning the loss of someone dear to them ...we pray,

Presider Generous and loving God, you sent Jesus to teach us about you: to show that you love us, that you care about us and that you continue to provide for us every day. Help us to trust in your unfailing love and live generously without fear. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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