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“This is a deserted place and it is already very late” (Matt 36:6).

*1 John 4:7-10; Matt 6:34-44*

Gandhi once said, “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” In today’s Gospel, Jesus gives the crowds bread as a sign of the gift of himself to satisfy a hunger deeper than our need for food. People need love to survive. Jesus is in the world as God’s love, the ultimate Bread of Life.

Jesus knew human hunger. After his baptism, he withdrew into the Judean wilderness to pray and fast for 40 days in preparation for his public ministry. He experienced the pangs of hunger when Satan tempted him to turn stones into loaves, but he also knew that there is a deeper hunger than for food, the hunger for God. Looking out over the crowds that had followed him, Jesus was moved with pity, for “they were like sheep without a shepherd,” lost and aimless for lack of meaning and direction.

The miraculous feeding of the crowd has many lessons, including the call to share with the hungry. Food pantries and soup kitchens fulfill the Corporal Work of Mercy that praises the generous: “I was hungry, and you gave me to eat.” Yet volunteers who provide for the poor know well that a meal cannot fill an empty heart or restore the lost dignity of those who must beg to survive in a world of overconsumption,

waste and indifference to the needy.

Contemporary society has been described as a “lonely crowd,” urban concentrations of people desperate to connect but isolated and rootless in an artificial landscape of physical consumption and spiritual emptiness. They are looking for love, meaning and community. Without these, human life quickly becomes a “deserted place” and people become “like sheep without a shepherd.”

The joy of the disciples and the crowd at the astonishing multiplication of bread and fish was an experience of the Beloved Community Jesus knew was possible when he proclaimed, “I have come that you might have life to the full.” Abundance, not scarcity, love instead of fear, sharing and not hoarding, community instead of competition. Love prompts compassion, which prompts generosity, which produces joy.

The First Letter of John expresses well the reality that every act of human love is an encounter with God. Those who love one another uncover the mystery of the Incarnation, that love unites divinity and humanity. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

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